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Isabelle Hui Saldaña March 3, 2017

(Dis)incubations: Performances of Color(s) as Within/Without/Against

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Abstract

(Dis)incubations: Performances of Color(s) as Within/Without/Against

By Isabelle Hui Saldaña

In this thesis, I use works by black mixed race/mulattx/afro-diasporic artists in order to posit that their performances of color(s)—ontologically black in color and off-color in their queerness—offer us (those of us interested in performance and all of us who live as social, socialized, and socializing beings in the world) opportunities to reconsider the frameworks we use to move through the world. I aim to look beyond the surface of these performances—the simple "what happens and what does it mean"—and instead theorize what haptic qualities—what material excesses that allow for possibility—lie hidden in the works. In doing so, I am essentially asking: what sort of disruptive forces are made available by the contents of these performances? How do these forces reconfigure the societal concepts that construct our social categories (of race, of sexuality, of gender)? And in these reconfigurings, how are these performances evoking ontological blackness, queerness, and femininity? I take on these questions less in hopes of defining or universalizing any answers to them and more so in the spirit of letting them guide my excavation of the worldmaking potential of performances of color(s). That is to say, it is my wish that this project will reveal how elements of these performances work *within* (often constricting) social and material realities, *without* majoritarian power, *against* the limitations imposed by this world in order to provide the imaginative fodder for entirely new ones.

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Foreword

My final project for my Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture major is the following written, graded thesis, titled "(Dis)incubations: Performances of Color(s) as Within/Without/Against." It is accompanied by an ungraded creative component: a performance art piece, titled *:: (un) incubate (with me) ::*, in which I break out of a egg made of mal-education and in a movement improvisation score set to a self-designed soundscape. These projects may seem disjointed, but they are, in fact, indivisibly fused by an interest in imagining what the liberatory capacities are available for minoritarian performers who exist in social and material realities built to constrict and restrict their possibilities in the world. Both set out to use the often illegible and not-readily-articulable qualities of minoritarian performance as a means of disorganizing the structures that allow the world to continue to function in these ways.

This written project is interested in critically engaging what I enact in my performance, in thinking through performance as a generative, space-making process that is resistive. As you will read, it calls upon the work of black mixed-race performers, to illustrate what new possibilities lie in wait for all of us as social beings—to construct new understandings of and ways of being ourselves, in relation to each other. I mean to treat the theoretical mining of these possibilities and subsequent-yet-simultaneous bearing of that knowledge as its own art form and performance. This is why you will find in my work not only a few formal poems placed as epigraphs to various sections, but also a somewhat fluid approach to the writing overall. At times, I use what Della Pollock, in her seminal essay "Performative Writing" calls "performative academic writing"—a metonymic writing style that forbids the Cartesian divides between writer and writing (as act and as object). Though some may find these moments occasionally dissimulating or a tad prosaic, I purposefully make certain departures from formal "scholarly"

mechanics and linear senses of logics in order to allow my work to be a breathing example of what I am writing about: opening up new worlds beyond majoritarian conventions of what they should look like.

That being said, I believe that my work is still coherent and intelligible to people from various disciplines. Furthermore, though firmly grounded in a performance studies methodology, the project pulls on the various fields in which I concentrated my undergraduate studies. I call upon my social science (namely sociology and anthropology) and history courses in order to provide background for my case studies—usually to explain to social and material realities the artists are working within. Secondly, I rely on theories regarding blackness, queerness, and femininity that come from my gender studies courses. I use my English literature and creative writing background not only to craft the many components of the piece itself, but also to further my performance studies analysis, using literary analysis and close readings both for my theoretical groundings and case studies. In these ways, I believe this is a final project that meets the goals of the Institute of the Liberal Arts and the Interdisciplinary Studies major.

Introduction

Black Celebration

It was but a small one, alight
among the smaller fires that make
a revolution. Little fanfare was there and only
subtle disagreement with the status quo was spoken,
and yet, the silent life in our too-loud bodies shouted for change,
demanded to grow as they threw on the burial dirt,
knowing better than to ask what for they would never give, and

I liked that.
It was nice,

which seems like such a simple term—
trite and overused as silverware at dinner parties
or words like *weather*—but it's hardly ever heard.
Not, at least, when they are talking about riots and rap music and
our Black Celebration. But this, this was but a small one,
quiet in our too-noisy bones, and "nice" is just right. For this,
this is for us.

In response to Ross Gay's "A Small Needful Fact"

Purpose of Performance

Mmmmhmmmmm's—incredulous, disparaging, uninterested, and fully over it—reverberate against tchuipes and clicks coming from pursed and lips to unite with the almost-audible eyerolls and hair flips of the performers in Rashaad Newsome's performance *Shade Compositions* (2012). A sort of queer choir, the lines of performers include both feminine and masculine bodies—bodies coded "male" or "female" with feminine or masculine constructs adhered, adjucated, supposed, expected, or not. They all wear tight tanks, short-shorts, and other feminine-coded clothing paired with highly aesthicized make-up and gaudy jewelry. Newsome, their conductor, calls our attention to the varied sounds of shade—a word with origins in black queer ballroom culture used to denote disrespect—by modulating the volume on the microphones for each line. Sighs collide with ringed-finger snaps, and voices demanding "what?!" scold the listener-viewers for performing their role while providing the very substance we are consuming.

There is no better piece to use to introduce the concept performances of color(s) than this one. While, yes, the performers are united in their horizontal sections by the pulsating hues of their wardrobe and cosmetics (their bodies covered with and organized into rows of red, blue, silvery white and black), and, yes, the performance incorporates a visible variety of racial backgrounds (Black, Latinx, Asian, white alike), it is not for either of these reasons alone that this a performance of color(s). Rather, the transgressive elements of the performance, the ones that open up the possibility for further hybridization and disorganization of binaries and their hierarchies, are key. Those features that "color" the performance are those that simultaneously make it "off-color": the dressing of "men" in mascara and miniskirts, the elevation of un-spellable sound to the level of instrumental note or lyric, and the utter *loudness* of the both visual

staging and the sonic cacophony that never settles on any sort of rhythm for very long. The layered explosions of binaries such as masculine/feminine, viewer/viewed, high/low culture, and respect/disrespect give the performance the worldmaking potential integral to performances of color(s). That said, the varied pigments of the performers' attire, maquillages, and skins certainly do contribute to making this performance one that is "of color(s)." This is not by virtue of the simple inclusion of literal and racial colors. Instead, the inclusion of colors in performance allows its own title to hold multiple valences; *shade* is able to take on its multiplicity of meanings (disses, tints, skin color variation) and thus is composed in a variety ways. In simpler terms, these elements allow the title to mean and be many things at once. The rejection of the singular and fixed category, the innate refusal to be complacent with a world which might try to place it in one, and the potential for reconfiguring our conceptions of the world are what make *Shade Compositions* a performance of color(s).

I use this example to illustrate what I mean by performances of color(s) because I must clarify how I have chosen to focus on the performances that I have, but also want to resist defining it with specifics that will narrow it into an exclusive category. But enough about the "of color(s)" modifier—what of performance itself? I take up how performance is a resistive model that opens rather than closes more robustly in the first section of the thesis. But for the purposes of explaining why I chose performance as my subject matter, I will simply say that my project is one concerned with widening possibilities and that performance is suited to such an aim. Richard Schechner, a foundational scholar of performance studies, claims that "performances are actions" and they must be understood as "a 'broad spectrum' or 'continuum' of human actions" (Schechner 2). The broadness of what can be considered performance is what makes it particularly appealing; there are no limits, rules, or norms other than the

following: “breaking norms is the norm of performance” (Taylor *Performance* 71). Furthermore, Schechner’s spectrum or continuum of human actions is meant to pertain to both a formal art tradition, as well as everyday life practices and social performances as put forth by social scientists like Erving Goffman. Consider again *Shade Compositions*. It includes both of the formal and the informal in its performance: the trappings of the concert hall and the performatives of social life (the “huh”s, “pfft”s, big bracelets and purses) that come from beyond that space. In fact, all the performances I explore in some ways utilize the formal and informal in their work, drawing from the textures of ordinary life and infusing them into the crafted performance, which is realized either in the gallery, on the canvas or in the printed book—for it is not only “live actions” that constitute performance, but *all* art, for *all* art is composed by a set of actions (arranging, painting, photographing, writing, etc.). This results in us (those of us interested in performance and all of us who live as social, socialized, and socializing beings) having the ability to re-extract elements from the performances and apply them to our everyday worlds.

In Diana Taylor’s words, “performance offers a way to transmit knowledge by means of the body,” even though not all performances “take place on bodies or involve the bodies of the artists” (Taylor, *Performance* 36, 38). Taylor is alluding to performance being a means of accessing embodied knowledge. As such, it is “a practice and an epistemology, a creative doing, a methodological lens, a way of transmitting memory [and] understanding of the world” (Taylor *Performance* 39). Thus, the purpose of my using performance as both the mode and matter of my interrogations is to be able to use a wide lens in deciding what to analyze; to allow the questions I ask and the conclusions I draw about their worldmaking potential to filter

into areas of life that are regularly seen as detached from the performance art worlds, and to pass that on to others.

Alternative Models for Blackness

So, if I have already mentioned, and will mention many times again, that performances of color(s) are not limited to ones that employ people of color nor particular chromatics, why am I primarily utilizing black mixed race, mulattx and other afro-diasporic artists? I have chosen to theorize these performances in part because of the intellectual lacuna that has resulted from very few scholars undertaking mixed race artists and art as their primary subject matter. More theoretically though, I am interested in what these performances can reveal to us about blackness, beyond racial blackness.

Though I explain my use of blackness more fully in Section I, I want to take a moment here to address it in relation to "mixedness." It is my hope that this project is not read as one meant to essentialize racial "mixedness," nor to ascribe or naturalize any qualities related to being mixed. Rather, I wish for this to both be seen as and *be* an endeavor in relation-making, one that calls upon the performative social functions of mixedness within blackness, as one of many conceptual tools to afford new valences of social and emotional reproduction. This is why I do not often dwell on the abjection or empowerment of personal narratives nor mixedness as an entity separated from blackness. Instead, I rely on the variety of performers and performances I call upon to inherently magnify the scope of not only what we think of as performance but also whom we think of as real and adequate performers of blackness.

Allow me to explain further. Because mixed race individuals are so often either dismissed as not *truly* black and/or position themselves in opposition to racial blackness (both

practices resulting from an anti-black tradition that places blackness at the bottom of the racial hierarchy), I am attempting to un-do a historical "praxeological distancing" here (Spillers "Notes" 169). I am positing, similarly to Hortense Spillers in her "Notes on an Alternative Model," that black mixed race people and/or mulattxs are of the *sam*e essence as blackness (Spillers "Notes" 167). If we can, as Sarah Cervenak does, think of blackness as expressing a certain "elasticity—an ability to mean and take on many different ideas, forms, and definitions"—then we may also see how the mutability of that which is, and those who are, mixed as inherently falls into the category of blackness (Cervenak 115). This mutability is exemplified by Jonathan Brennan's sketch of the "mixed race tragic trickster constructed in literature. Using Gerald Vizenor's logic from *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* that "comedies and trickster signatures are liberations; [and] tragedies are simulations, an invented cultural isolation," Brennan outlines a trickster figure who can leave a passive and tragic (as in tragic mulattx) half-breed positionality and instead plant themselves "between [cultures in a way] that works against cultural isolation" (Brennan 47). This new position is compatible with Cervenak's concept of elasticity and allows for the trickster to take on many forms. The "rejection of 'monologic truth' and a championing of 'multiple memories, autobiographies, [multiple cultural traditions],' without privileging the truth of one memory over the other" that results from inhabiting the trickster position is also a key component of blackness that I explore later in the thesis (Brennan 46).

In order to move beyond racial blackness (without forsaking it), I turn to Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. For Moten, blackness is "a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity," where the imagined construction of subjectivity denotes the capacity to possess (Moten *Break* 1). He

deconstructs this dialectic of subjecthood and personhood by revealing the "dispossessive force [that] objects exert (Moten *Break* 1). Objecthood serves as a resistive force to subjectivity because it indicates a capacity of people to *be* possessed. Moten opens *In the Break* with the concomitant declaration that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (Moten *Break* 1). Recognizing that subject and object are inherently fabricated categories that have taken on certain significations and connotations, his discussion of blackness lies where the dichotomy of subject/object is most clear in human history: transatlantic slavery, in which people were turned into commodities—theoretical and literal objects for purchase and exchange (Moten *Break* 15).

According to Cervenak, black artists experiment with the notion of objecthood via "self-abstraction," a process by which artists turn themselves into objects that exert the dispossessive force Moten talks about, in order to strain the assumed equivalence between subjectivity and personhood (Cervenak 115). The elasticity of blackness is what allows for the dissolution of this Enlightenment fabrication, as the supposed object, or "beheld," asserts agency over itself and its "beholder" (Moten *Break* 4). How this ontological blackness—the manner of always being a "disruptive surprise"—interacts with racial blackness is explored later in the thesis. However, we can apply it now to *Shade Compositions,* where the performers participate in a black performative tradition of conveying messages through a particular linguistic and sonic vernacular that has no fixed meaning, but rather is conveyed by its context and intonation (e.g., the single exclamation-question "what?!" is an excited congratulations, a lamenting commiseration, a gentle chiding, a verbal warning to back off, or a question and a request for another speaker to say more). This performative tradition is one that has roots in racial blackness—echoing back to the fields where enslaved Africans created languages to

communicate only to each other, despite being watched by the slave master—yet is still a "manifestation as the inscriptional events of a set of performances" that Moten defines as ontological blackness (Moten *Break* 255).

I have briefly explained these alternative models of blackness (as elasticity, as ontological resistance, and objecthood) here not primarily as an act of convincing, but as a way to further elucidate my choice to use black mixed race artists and other artists of the black diaspora. Though, per Cervenak, black performance does not limit itself to being produced by black people and instead grapples with the transient quality of blackness as an abstract concept loosened from racial signification, the self-objectification of black bodies holds a particular liberating potential due to the violent, historical objectification of black bodies. In other words, though these alternative models for understanding blackness allow us to unfasten it from its assignment to race in helpful ways, it is also worthwhile to consider the ways in which it is still attached the historical formation and construction of racialized bodies. This is the reason why I primarily call upon those bodies when discussing it.

From Disidentifications to (Dis)incubations

I, like Jose Esteban Muñoz, always "marvel at the ways in which nonwhite children survive a white supremacist U.S. culture that preys on them. I am equally in awe of the ways in which queer children navigate a homophobic public sphere that would rather they did not exist" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 37). I have found his theorizing of the strategies and rituals that allow for the staggering survival rates of queer people of color, what he calls the minoritarian self-making processes of "disidentifications," quite beneficial for thinking through the power of performance, particularly queer performance (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). This is apparent in

my extensive use of his work throughout my thesis. However, I have chosen to build upon disidentifications rather than simply utilize the word for the following reasons.

First, while I find theories around identity interesting, important and largely generative (even utilizing them in parts of my section laying out this thesis's theoretical groundwork), I do not believe that identifications—even the iterations of it that are constructed through "subcultural fields" as disidentifications are—are at the heart of what I am drawing out from these performances (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). Muñoz and I are both informed by the belief that "the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or… essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). We also agree that there is a certain "fiction of identity," more easily accessed by the majoritarian performers who many not have to structure their self-formation through multiple, conflicting sites (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). However, his tracing of disidentifications are all based in subject-formation, or the "[activation of one's] own sense of self" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). This is where our intellectual traditions diverge; for, despite our shared interested in what Néstor García Canclini calls "hybrid transformations," I believe that the reduction of performers to a subject status (often through identity) is also tired (Clancini 32).

For Muñoz, hybridity refers to the "fragmented subject formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality and gender identifications (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 32). As such, he primarily discusses how subjects' identities are formed in response to state powers' cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). I, on the other hand, am trying to unlock the possibilities for *objecthood* that the performances themselves contain—incorporating the performers (conductors, writers,

artists, makers, witnesses, participants) as vital parts of understanding the performances, of course, but still not at the core of what I am interrogating.

Rather than trying to understand the "reformatting of self within the social," I am interested in the reformatting of the social altogether—not by the subject, but by the object (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 32). My interest in hybridity and hybrid transformations focuses more on the mélange of relations and actions that open up the space of objecthood, which then in turn opens up other narrow constructions. I replace "identification" with "incubation" to more readily incorporate the spatiality of this process—one that takes place within the number of symbolic systems in which our social bodies constantly gestate. My work recognizes literary critic Fredric Jameson's call "to raise spatial issues as a fundamental… concern" (Katz 67). Performance is the catalyst for addressing those concerns, as it creates a black and queer space in which transformative, dialectical conversations can take place—a space where we find the tools to and that is the tool to reconfigure our own social womb, if you will.

In order to describe the *way* I am accessing the spatial, I turn to the haptic. According to Dr. Rizvana Bradley, the haptic "can be understood [as] the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility for performance" (Bradley "Other Sensualities" 129). In her introduction to the special edition of *Women & Performance*, she proposes that we think of the haptic as a "specific set of material negotiations between bodies, spaces and objects" which can "generate critical insight into emergent tactile economies" (Bradley "Sensualities" 130). As such, it can also be thought of as that which directs us to "somatic forms of knowledge attuned not only to contemporary bodies and spaces, but also to the worlds and imaginations that have both conditioned and surpassed the body in and of performance" (Bradley "Sensualities" 131).

The term "incubation" more readily accesses the haptic qualities that I'm looking for in other works; the word is far more "textured," and using it evokes reproduction and growth and the liminality of the embryo—that object which exists in a larger body that it cannot choose but also enacts work on and against the body that holds it (Bradley "Sensualities" 129). In Crémieux et al's introduction of *Understanding Blackness through Performance*, the possibility of queerness and blackness is the "space and time where the . . . body can appear, disappear, and mutate . . . oscillating between the real and the phantasmic " (Crémieux 2). This is precisely the state we exist in as we incubate.

I keep the "dis" portion of Muñoz's term as a nod to his unparalleled work and to maintain (and transfer over to (dis)incuations) his tongue in cheek quip that disidentifications "diss identity" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 5). Beyond Muñoz, Myron Beasley takes on this same parentheticalized prefix—though my purposes for bracketing it is to further cite the haptic—in what he calls "(dis)narratives." He addresses how the relation between textual performance/performativeness and embodied phenomena emphasizes the "dialogical performance" of blackness—"that which transforms at once the object, the subject, and the discipline" (Beasley 12, Crémieux 4). The similarities in our projects, and other uses of the prefix (such as in Stephany Spaulding's use of "(dis)placement" to understand "queered borderlands") has helped convinced me that there is indeed a viability and benefit to continuing its use (Crémieux 94). Moreover, I think it is actually the most accurate prefix for what happens to the incubator structure (the category, construction, or discipline), as I theorize it. It is not simply *un*done or *re*made though those developments may too be a part, and often are part, of the process. Instead the incubators logics are jumbled up, revealed as random; the

"organization of social institutions" and constructs which usually "appear 'natural,' 'ordinary,' and 'normal'" becomes *dis*organized (Wallace 5).

The language of (dis)incubations accommodates my attempts to uncover what haptic elements exist in the black and queer performances of photographs, object-collages, drawings, paintings, poems, videos and body art. It takes us past the recognition of these elements and into a process for discovering the possibilities for working *within* (often constricting) social and material realities, *without* majoritarian power, and *against* the limitations imposed by our conditions in order to remake the worlds we live and grow in.

If You Read Nothing Else Read This

This thesis is, in essence, a theoretical offering. I am presenting (dis)incubations in order to contribute a potentially generative word with which we may be able to think more expansively about the work of hybrid, minoritarian performers. The questions that naturally come up when we discuss artists are: Who are they? What are they doing? Why does it matter?

While the first two of these questions are answerable, potentially very easily (*Most of us. Making art.*), they are not the questions that this project is interested in. This is partially because the project is not invested in answering many questions at all and partially because it wants us to participate in asking different kinds of questions: Who *could be* a minoritarian performer? How can we reimagine the world *through* what they're doing? And it leaves those questions unanswered. That is to say, the thesis suggests possibilities for the answers to those questions (both overtly and subtly) instead of assigning a single response—for to do so would ultimately prove hopelessly prescriptive or uselessly broad.

The remaining question is then: Why does it matter? I am ambivalent about this question, and I believe the project wavers similarly and constantly between the desire to stamp out a plethora of philosophical and ethical reasons as to why this work is important and the desire to eschew it entirely. I hesitate to answer the interpellating call to perform the labor of rendering myself and my work visibly "relevant," yet I am at once entirely fearful of falling back on the all-too-familiar intellectual sneer of *if you have to ask, it doesn't.* Thus, I am stumbling somewhere in the middle of, outside of, or against these options when I say this:

Perhaps this project does not matter to you. And perhaps this makes me deeply sad or angry or indignant or frustrated (with both of us) or just mildly melancholy at the expectedness of this reality. However, this project is a thank you gift to an academic tradition that cares for the marginalized, one that believes hip-hop is metaphysical and considers my grandmother in her garden as much a knowledge bearer as any professor. Like many who wrote before me and are writing with me, I write this to and for and because there are those of us who are acutely aware that some things are missing from our worlds—things as tangible as fresh produce, wheelchair ramps, trans librarians, and (permanent and accessible) HIV and abortion clinics; and things as impalpable as empathy, as support for anti-capitalist resistance, as knowing that there are other people like you or that your life matters. I write this because I know I am not the only one who needs new worlds, who needs the impossible to be possibilized and for utopias to exist. This interdisciplinary tradition has been my surprising and necessary refuge from expectation, and I write this small contribution to it in hopes that on some page, someone will find something that helps them exhale a breath they did not know they were holding and take a new one.

Section I.

Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Performances of Color(s) as Resistive

Ground Haikus

Your gravestone, gray as
skin of a never-lived—ours,
soon as you die, too.

--

Blood on the outside
Of my interior life
Ending outside us

--

Do you remember
It? Forget forget forget
Remember forget

--

What to call myself
Now? If I died in the womb
Am I drowning or drowned?

--

Colostrum, unused—
Imagined on unformed lips.
Still, I wait—wasting.

--

Your arms, gestation—
Broken, unable to hold
Me the way dirt could.

I. Performance as Beyond & Against

Performance pushes against our preconceived perceptions of the boundaries of being. It brings to the forefront alternative modes of being—modes that a capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist, cis-hetero-patriarchy tells us are impossible—thus challenging our internalized assumptions about the conditions under which we can survive. The performer does not have to be "conscious" of these qualities of performance in order for their performance to be resistive. The cataloging of performance as "conscious/unconscious," "intentional/unintentional," or "resistive/complicit" is not only reductive but redundant, as performance's inherent resistance lies in the way it constantly exceeds consciousness, intentionality, and categorization.

Categorization is a project of those oppressive systems that performance resists. To index, label and record is to capture and define. These processes of separation, of opposition and, ultimately, containment are precisely what are scrambled in the process of (dis)incubation. In order to understand how (dis)incubation reprograms the function of oppressive systems, we must first understand how they are designed to function. André Lepecki's explanation of modernity does just that. He describes it as

> "a long durational project, metaphysically and historically producing and reproducing a 'psycho-philosophical frame' where the privileged subject of discourse is always gendered as the heteronormative male, raced as white, and experiencing his truth as (and within) a ceaseless drive for autonomous, self-motivated, endless, spectacular movement." (Lepecki 13)

Even the wording of the product of this project as a "frame" is indicative: what does a frame do if not attempt to delineate boundaries, to designate a "within"? Yet a frame is also perfect for revealing exactly how supposedly-encompassing categorization fails before it even begins. With every "within" that a frame creates, there exists a space outside it, excessive of it. In fact, the "within" cannot exist without (a "without"). The frame relies upon the "without" to indicate the

"within." Performers who operate between this "within" and "without," or from the place of the "without," work *against* the imaginary frame altogether. This types of (dis)incubating performances, ones that reveal the fabrication of the frame and imagine new possibilities for worlds constructed by other elements, are not uncommon.

Nevertheless, modernity and its counterparts (historically: the Enlightenment and industrialization; theoretically: subjectivity) insist on "producing and reproducing" this frame (Lepecki 13, 17). In this way, I believe the projects of modernity can be read as parts of the larger project of the institution, defined in this thesis as the combination of oppressive forces that are meant to contain. Modernity's primary project is destruction-construction: destroying what already exists (then, as Lepecki points out, reading the destructed space as "empty") and creating categories to comprehend what "remains," organizing them into binaries and hierarchies. The ultimate goal of destruction-construction is to perform power by capturing the body in a visible, stable form, preferably through the white, "able-bodied," cis-gender and heterosexual male subject who is constantly moving and producing, or else articulating, archiving, commodifying, or objectifying.

Yet performance that pushes against flat binaries (of black/white, male/female, able/disable) reveals how this destruction-construction is never fully realized. Performance's *deconstruction* of the fixed, singular being is part of what does now allow the aforementioned white cis-male body is unable to be fully "naturalized," in the Derridean sense, as the all-encompassing subject; it "takes to pieces" and reveals the organization of the hierarchal binaries (Gnanasekaran 212). Instead, it allows for then process of transformation and becoming (Deleuze 3). Artist Felix Gonzalez Torres's performative practice is particularly well suited to this discussion of disrupting established classifications through a process of complicating or outright

refusing categorization. His work has been explored as troubling the relationship between hierarchized binaries such as public/private, highbrow/lowbrow, and subject/object. In this section of the chapter, I will use it to highlight performance's capacity for resisting institutional projects of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy.

A. The Project of Colonialism: Containing Memory

The construction of the legitimate archive, as theorized by Diana Taylor, is a colonial project that sought to privilege writing as the most, if not only, valid form of memorialization (Taylor *The Archive and Repertoire* 17-8). She charts the ontology of this project, explaining how writing moved from being "far more dependent on embodied culture for transmission than the other way around" (17). In keeping with the practice of destruction-construction, the colonizers chose to "burn the ancient codices [before limiting] the access to writing to a very small group of conquered [sic] males who they felt would promote their efforts" (18). They destroyed the previous written culture, constructing their own in such a manner (legitimizing it over other non-verbal epistemic and mnemonic systems) that they were "assured [a] Power… [that] could be developed and enforced without the input of the great majority of the population, the indigenous and marginal populations… without access to systematic writing" (18). The privileging of this legitimate archive meant the invalidation of its presumed opposite, the repertoire.

The distinction that Taylor draws between the archive and the repertoire is the following: the archive is memory that "exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change," whereas the repertoire "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance,

singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (Taylor *Archive* 19, 20). The archive, per the institution's interests, often "separat[es] the source of 'knowledge' from the knower—in time and/or space," making it seem all-encompassing and unchanging (19). However, the repertoire requires a sort of presence and participation in the embodied act that makes it seem unstable, and thus unappealing to the colonialist eye. Nevertheless, Taylor theorizes that these sources of memory are not as diametrically opposed as we have been led to believe, that they actually work together to produce and reproduce knowledge.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Madrid 1971), Untitled (Me and My Sister), Untitled (Ross and Harry),* and *Untitled (Loverboy)* are all pieces that reconstruct our concept of history and memory, allowing it to break with the written archive. Muñoz describes these photograph jigsaw puzzles in cellophane as performances that "connote memory's fragility and permanence, … [reminding] us of … the ways in which images form memories and, in turn, memories themselves fall together" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 174). In other words, these pieces engage with memory—and help us to engage with memory—without striving to simply document a memory itself. The pieces disrupt the idea that an artifact is an encapsulation of an experience, its worth measured by how it matches the actual one (Taylor *Archive* 17). Rather than "announc[ing] itself as a cultural artifact," the puzzles invoke the actual process of memory, speaking to past experiences of exile, ethnicity, and queerness without naming them. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres resists the temptation to contain (and subsequently constrain) memory, by rejecting the lie that artifacts and memories are impervious to change. The pieces oscillate between the space of the archive (in their photographic surfaces, protected by cellophane) and

the repertoire (in the performative action of putting the pieces together and into the bags), refusing to be contained in either category or to make the containment of memory their goal.

B. The Project of Capitalism: Constant Production

Gonzalez-Torres's spill sculptures move beyond categorization in the archive or repertoire in a similar manner. On one hand, pieces such as *Untitled (Ross)* function as a sort of archived memory of a person, as the piece begins as a pile of wrapped candies that weighs 175 pounds each morning, for the weight of Ross Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres's partner who died of HIV/AIDS. Yet on the other, because spectators are encouraged "literally to take a piece of the work with them," it is performative. It not only requires the presence and participation that often characterizes the transfer of memory in the repertoire (embodied memory) but also disturbs the boundary between spectator and art object in a way that Peggy Phelan describes as "essentially performative" (Phelan 146). This piece has been read previously as a symbolic process, the taking away and replenishing of the candies a metaphor for Ross's back and forth with his disease. In this reading, the candy spill can be seen as more than sculptures but also as portraiture (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 177). It is a photograph, or even video—constant capturing of the image of a person at different times, with its own sounds and subtle differences of the moment. I'd like to expand our understanding of this piece even further by reading it as an endurance-based performance.

Endurance based performances are performances that involve hardship that takes place over time and/or space. It utilizes the *conditions* under which the performance takes place to pushes against our conception of boundaries. Durational endurance art specifically disrupts our understanding of time. *Untitled (Ross)* dislocates a notion of linear time that is born out of

capitalism. The daily refilling of the piece creates a circular life for Ross; one that repeats differently each day and is not constantly working towards a final end-stage. This refusal to complete, to accomplish production, is in line with Patrick Anderson's theorization that endurance based performance resists the capitalist time machine's cycle of production (Anderson 64-5). Capitalism's goal for the body is for it to be in constant, machine-like production for the purpose of consumption. While Gonzalez-Torres's spill pieces could perhaps be scripted into this cycle of producing and expending and literal re-stocking, I view the candies as resisting being "ontologically defined by the work [they] perform" the way that capitalism would like them to be (Anderson 64).

In his analysis of these pieces, Muñoz focuses on how the spills are "literally consumed by the spectators" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 177). This process indicates two things for me. Firstly, it outlines another way that the spill pieces constitute a performative body engaged in a durational performance that critiques capitalism. Secondly, it exposes how that performative body inhabits the space of objecthood. To explain: durational performance, especially those that involve fasting, tend towards a type of exhaustion that removes the body from its capacity for labor. The decomposition of the body over the course of a performance takes it out of the mode of a functioning body that is intended for useful production and into the space of something like intersubjectivity, defined by Martha Fineman as the creation and negotiation of systems of meaning between people (Fineman 3). The body becomes a gift—in this case, both the literal "souvenirs and treats" and the more abstract opportunity for reimagining. A performance engaged in intersubjectivity suggests that the performance "integrates the spectator has multiple meanings, is durational… invites the spectator into its scene" (Anderson 90). The spill pieces do indeed reduce the space between spectator and art object—almost completely. It blurs the

boundary between beholder and beheld, by forcing what would be the "viewers" to participate in creating the conditions of the space that the performative body endures. In this way, however, the beheld is able to "mess with" the beheld, a la Moten's understanding of objecthood. Thus, the Western myth of a self-sufficient subjectivity is subverted (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 169). The performative body of the candies—once again literally and theoretically—inhabits the space of objecthood. It relinquishes the control assumed in the framework of subjectivity to endure and accept—to *invoke*—a constant deterioration and recreation of its being. And yet, though the medium of and space inhabited by the body is that of the commodity, the ultimate "product" is a *gift,* largely disengaged from the capitalist frameworks of exchange or utility. In this way, the performative body of the candy spills is the source of non-capitalist creation; its mere being is a becoming, and its existence—not its production—is repetitiously overflowing.

C. The Project of White Supremacy: Identification / Representation

Within a white supremacist framework, "The roles that are available … for Latino/a[/x] and other minority identities are narrow, static, and fixed" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 166). White supremacy constructs and commissions exotic and monolithic representations of Latinx peoples that are, "in most instances, unable to account for the specificity of black and queer lives or any other collision of two or more minority designations" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 166). Thus, Gonzalez-Torres employed "disidentity politics" in order to reject the restraints of identity altogether. He was "deeply weary... [and] critical of multiculturalism's narrative of identity," which relies largely on the rather simplistic frameworks of essentialism and affirmation (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 178). So, he rebuffed the conjuring of representations in favor of connoting identity outside of the dominant representational economy.

We see this in his 1991 billboard, *Untitled,* which were "installed throughout New York City depicting an empty and unmade bed, two pillows marked with the indentation of two absent heads" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 170). On a visual level, the image is devoid of any invocation of the exotic colors and rituals that white supremacy utilizes in its representations of latinidad. It opts instead for an image of the every day that "connotes a *disidentity,* a version of self that is crafted through something other than rote representational practices" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 170). A crucial component of this "something other than" is affect. Jennifer Doyle's understanding of affect as the diffuse quality of emotion or feeling that transports us to a "site of unraveling and dispossession" is useful in understanding how Gonzalez-Torres's work resists the white supremacist project of identification / representation, which go hand in hand to locate and render visible to the masses a homogenized "racialized subject" (Doyle xiv). Muñoz claims that it is a "'structure of feeling' that cuts through certain Latino and queer communities but is no way exclusive to *any* identitarian group" that allows the work to speak to the AIDS epidemic, especially among the queer Latinx community, without being embedding itself in the project of representing a specific pain for the masses.

Alternately, Gonzalez-Torres is subverting the idea that the masses can only understand the reduced form of its marginalized by publicly-yet-secretly speaking to the "cognoscenti" (or those who are members of the communities under siege and, thus, Muñoz argues, more likely to be "in the know" about the political meaning of the piece) through a language that people outside the communities can still understand. Despite there being supposedly "nothing to identify with—no figure, no text, no gesture, barely an object, only an absence" (a formulation that desires a bit of problematizing, which I come to later in this chapter), an emotion of loss that many may relate to is communicated (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 170). Affect's emotional field is "the space where

we come to know ourselves," and by employing it in this piece, Gonzalez-Torres restructures the process of identifying (Doyle xi). The absence of bodies in the piece then serves a two-fold function of removing the subject to identify with and of "organiz[ing] the space around us" into a "site of connection and intimacy, of alienation and radicalization" (Doyle 125, 125). Thus, it is ultimately invisibility and the affective nature of absence that allows Gonzalez-Torres to position his work as a "formidable obstacle to facile conceptions of identity" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 166). His choice to rely on affect, which cannot be "parsed and categorized, produced and consumed at will," (the way that white supremacy would like minorities to be) exposes and resists the futility of multicultural pluralism's rhetoric of inclusion as simply another iteration of white supremacy's identification / representation project (Doyle 147). Knowing this, we may return then, to the question of resistive capacity of performances of color and my argument that it exists despite consciousness or intentionality.

II. Resistive Capacity of Performances of Color(s)

Performances that exist without majoritarian power are too often read as having nothing to do with power relations (beyond being ignored because of them). However, James Scott reminds us throughout *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Trasncripts,* that that which lies just beyond what makes it into the popular, hegemonic, and dominant public transcript is a hidden transcript critiquing and threatening powerholders (Scott 3). Those whom Scott refers to as "subordinates," contribute to and embody the hidden transcript (Scott 3). As the Jamaican slave proverb he invokes suggests, they are "play[ing] fool to catch the wise"—disguising themselves as uneducated in or unaware of the technologies of the powerful while engaging in practices that actually target their weak points (Scott 3). The performance (of deference and

consent, for Scott) then eludes the observation of the powerful figures, even while impacting the institution (Scott 5).

Following in Scott's logic then: even though Felix Gonzalez-Torres's artistic practice's resistance (and the art itself, at times) may be invisible to the powerful, and regardless of whether he intends it to be one, the practice is one of institutional critique. Per Jennifer Gonzalez's definition, it "indicates the detailed analyses of networks of power and systems of representations in order to reveal the cultural mechanisms at play" (Gonzalez 67). Furthermore, his work provides "a specific commentary on the power and pervasiveness of market capitalism, patriarchy, patrimony, or race discourse operates through social institutions" (Gonzalez 67). While this critique is perhaps not its explicit purpose, I believe Gonzalez-Torres's practice challenges the destruction-construction, categorizing project of the instituion in a way that forces its systems to betray their own insufficiency in order to accomplish the very projects they've created. His jigsaw pieces in the plastic bags are evidence of "artful mediation" of the supposed lines between archive and repertoire that point to "the ways in which reproduction, representation, and any rote understanding they engender are insufficient" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 176). His spill sculptures, when read as a series of repeated durational endurance performances, creates a performative body which willfully inhabits the space of "unproductive" objecthood and frames it as a gift, when capitalism would rather have people buying into the space of productive subjectivity. He openly bucks against simplified identity-based readings of his works. Even just the refusal to title his pieces save for the parenthetical hint that "suggests a meaning related to experiences of the artist's life, *but* always open and multivalent" gestures toward a refusal to participate in this economy of representation and categorization that the institution would have us rely upon (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 175).

The resistive capacity in Gonzalez-Torres's work is in how it exposes the institution's attempts to either contain or destroy anything "other" is a mere performance of power. Ontologically black performance such as his does not need use the institution's performative tools—consciousness, reasonableness, rationality, subjectivity—to expose it; . It does it simply by showing that "the other" continues to exist; it has power, *is power*, by simply happening. That is why the existence of the Black (used in its most capacious sense) performer is a daring statement of resistance in a world that does not want it to exist for fear of the very excess that it relies upon to sustain itself (the "without" that defines the "withins" of its frames).

A. Locating Blackness in/as Resistive Capacity

William Pope.L's praxis functions similarly to Gonzalez-Torres's in that he too is an artist of these reconfigured realities. For Pope.L, contradiction makes sense, and he uses it as a primary tool in his deconstruction of our ideas of reality. Whether he is crawling on New York streets in a suit or covering his nearly naked body in mayonnaise, Pope L. literally puts "his ass on the line" in order to disabuse us of our fetishization of truth, of fact—of one true and factual reality and the limitations that such an idea imposes (Pope.L 65). I argue that his body of work is, in addition to being an intervention in the concepts of the absolute truths that create contradiction in the first place, indicative of the resistive capacity I described earlier and can lend itself to understanding the location of blackness in performances of color. Blackness here is not racial blackness, but rather a quality of complicating and reconstructing the socially constructed discourses—such of those of race. This is particularly important to (dis)incubation's reorganization and disorganization of social location. In this section, I will use Pope.L's practice

and understanding of contradiction, which is at the heart of the motivation, execution, and lasting effects of his work, to discuss blackness and resistive capacities in tandem.

Pope.L discusses contradiction most, or perhaps almost, directly in an interview conducted by Martha Wilson, where Wilson begins the interview intent on understanding why it is that Pope.L's work is "imbedded in contradiction… where the fixation upon contradiction [came] from" (Wilson 51). Pope.L responds by citing a tendency in his family "for things to fall apart" despite a "desire to keep things together" (Wilson 51). He sees this conflict as a way to "produce a world or object" and "the reason for the contradiction is that [he's] suspicious of things that make sense" (Wilson 51). However, even in the performance of the interview, in which his responses both elude and answer Wilson's questions, Pope.L invites an interrogation of Wilson's self-diagnosed anxiety over establishing exactly why the work is "embedded in contradiction" (Wilson 51).

Pope.L's "actual" performance pieces seem to work under a similar motivation: raising questions about the need to be told a stable, clear answer and the complacency that surrounds such understandings. For example, in a performance at Franklin Furnace, Pope.L stood "nearly naked in the front window with [his] butt facing the street… covering [himself] with mayonnaise on [his] chest and [his] legs, [his] arms and face" (Wilson 53). He talks about enjoying materials such as mayonnaise and peanut butter because their forms change throughout the performance and draw into question our stable understandings of what whiteness and blackness are. He uses the mayonnaise to expose a sort of unseen truth about whiteness, to "reveal its lack in a very material way," while also questioning its oppositional relation to brownness or blackness, which is a thick, "brown goo" (Wilson 53). Pope.L ends his discussion of this piece by claiming that he uses "contradiction to critique and simultaneously celebrate" (Wilson 53). He critiques the

limitations that using race as a theoretical framework for whiteness and blackness creates, while celebrating the ways that these materials counter-construct the ideas. His materials work with these concepts in different forms, allowing him to break free of the tired social constructions of race and biological essentialism. He creates a new way of understanding blackness in which the societal limitations that he claims hinder "how much one can reconstruct one's conditions" break down (Wilson 53). Whiteness no longer constructs blackness, the way that it does in conversations about phenotypical blackness. In this way, the piece is a (dis)incubating one, an intervention into our understanding of the categories of race altogether.

In *Crawl Piece,* Pope.L is again challenging our understanding and our complacency with the way we understand the "reality" of the world. In this piece, he wears a suit and crawls on the street of the Bowery in New York, holding a potted plant. His *Notes on a Crawling Piece* tells us that "The real question / Lies in the juxtaposition / Of destitution and plenitude"—that the key of the piece is the contrast of two worlds that are "unnerving" when they collide (Pope.L 65). According to our understanding of the world, destitution and plentitude exist in separate spheres, with different bodies inhabiting each. Yet, during the crawl he has created a new reality, where suits may scrape across the street—where a body clothed in "a symbol of [material] privilege" experiences, and allows others to experience, a radical new positionality.

Thus, this piece, and Pope.L's discussion of it, begins to call into question our conception of the body entirely. When conceiving of *Crawl Piece,* Pope.L wanted to align himself with those who had less, materially, than he did, and decided to put himself literally on the street. He says, "I wanted to get inside that body" (Wilson 51). This goes beyond the anatomical body and moves to inhabiting the experience of the body. This is in line with Judith Butler's understanding of performativity, where "the body is a set of possibilities… it is a materiality that bears

meaning" (272). In this way, the body is similar to the other mediums he uses—which range from peanut butter and mayonnaise to manure and rat poison—as it becomes a material that can be transformed. When its verticality is rejected in favor of horizontality the body is transformed and bears meaning through its transformation. Suddenly, "the social agent is an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts" (Butler 270). The body then can be "done" (Butler 272).

This concept is especially interesting when thought of in conjunction with Taylor's earlier mentioned idea of the repertoire, which "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" (Taylor *Archive* 20). If we revisit this concept and put the two together, the body becomes a source of possible knowledge and memory. Pope.L's comment that he crawls "to remember" fits in with this understanding of the body as something more than a solid, stable entity (Wilson 51). The performance deconstructs the notion of the unchanged body by acting as a part of the repertoire, which "both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning" (Taylor 20). The fact that there were multiple crawls follows the idea that embodied acts "reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories and values… [they] generate, record, and transmit knowledge" (Taylor 21). By crawling, Pope.L reconfigures how we see the body and its enactment in performance, thus finding a new way that memory or truth can be accessed.

Through Pope.L's practice of immersing the body—and all that is constituted within the reconceived body—in the work that the contradictions emerge. Pope.L's work does more than just resist this world and the supposedly stable truths it tries to push upon us. As Muñoz would put it, he is making entirely new worlds, where categories are shattered and contradictions are no longer nonsensical (Muñoz *Disidentifications* ix). In the course of each performance, Pope.L

creates contradictions that create a sort of questioning of the status quo—he disturbs the peace and in turn deconstructs the concept of peace entirely. When we accept this disruption, we can see the instability of truth that his work reveals. We may live in a new reality, a world where the truths that bore these contradiction no longer rule. At last, with ontological blackness, we can move past and exceed the social limitations that inspired the work in the first place.

B. Theoretical Relationship to Queerness

As we move through this understanding of resistance and blackness, it is both important and necessary to invite queerness, or non/anti-normativity into the conversation (Ahmed 149). Queerness, for Muñoz, operates as an action. It is a performative, always "being done"; queer*ness* is equal to queer*ing*, defined as the opening up of potentiality (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 1). I'm interested in what spaces can be queered—opened up and potentially reimagined—particularly those already offered by black, queer writers. I often find myself gingerly enamored with the iterations of space suggested by many black queer theorists.

I posit this as a hesitant affair because I am cautious of any attempts to outline—to firmly draw the edges around, and thus indicate an "in" and "out" to—the concept and body of queerness. While I worry about this practice of defining (as it is known to generate these aforementioned illusions of reducibility), I also think that there is a liberatory potential to thinking of and through the "containers" of queerness, to interrogating its relation to space. The artists I discuss in this thesis are all engaging with this potential, but I'd like to take this moment to step away from art praxes in order to theoretically flesh out the resistive capacity of performance and its relationship to queerness.

Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Cheryl Clarke concern themselves with queerness in its form as "identity" rather than "process." Their primary engagement is with the

politics of sex and sexuality and their material realities. In the chapter, "Prisons for our Bodies, Closets for our Minds," from her book *Black Sexual Politics,* Collins focuses on the mutual influence of racism and heterosexism on each other (88). She demands a (racially) black liberatory politics that recognizes how these systems underpin marginalization and share a history of reinforcing oppression (Collins 88-89). Clarke is involved in a similar project of "calling out/in," and her article "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" speaks to the absorption and reproduction of heteropatriarchy within supposedly revolutionary Black Nationalist politics (191). There is an interrogation here, at times overt and at times implicit, which can be traced into Hortense Spillers' seminal piece "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." This interrogation asks why racially Black communities, which, from the moment of forced captivity and dispersal, have always engaged in complex and non-normative (i.e. non-Western, non-nuclear, horizontal as opposed to vertical, etc.) kinship relations, continue to refuse the call to transform our notions of what valid relationships and families look like beyond the heteronorm (Spillers 75). As much as this is an interrogation, it is also an intra-community plea to cease our undiscerning adoption of white, colonial hierarchies.

Alternately, none of these scholars are afraid to condemn. Both Collins and Clarke are quick to implicate Black men in the purposeful erasure of non-normative sexualities from the discourse on Black liberation, and specifically question the absence of the Black lesbians. Enter Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, who takes up the project of charting the poetics and politics of women who love women. Her commitment to Caribbean lesbian literature fills this void but also moves beyond a reductive understanding of queerness as homosexuality. She defines it as follows (emphasis added):

"Queer not in the sense of a 'gay' or same-sex loving identity

> waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a *praxis of resistance*. Queer in the sense of *marking disruption to the violence of normative order* and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths. (Tinsley, "Black Atlantic" 199).

By teasing out queerness as practice, Tinsley recognizes that any attempts to articulate queerness as simply a socially constructed identity ignores the work that it does to liberate us from the reductive nature of construction. Queerness is rearticulated as practice in Tinsley's tracing of the term "Creole women use for their female lovers": *mati* (Tinsley, "Black Atlantic" 192). *Mati,* she finds, can be etymologically traced to word mate—shipmate. Her own definition of the derivation, "she who survived the Middle Passage with me," transforms the literal possessive of "my girl" into an identity dependent on, inextricable from, this act of survival (192). By asserting in *Thiefing Sugar* that *mati* (and other Caribbean sexuality nomenclature, such as *zanmi*, outside of Euro/Americancentric terms like "queer") is *made*—a repeated act of creation, similar to the repeated enactments of Butler's performatives—Tinsley further grounds queerness "in the act," in what is done and re-done (Tinsley, *Thiefing* 7).

C. Tying Up Blackness and Queerness: Resistive Capacity and Spatiality

This verbalization of sexuality as "not as an identity but as praxis, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions" opens up the possibility for sexuality to become a more fragile concept (Tinsley, *Thiefing* 7). This should sound familiar to how ontological blackness functions to disorganize our understandings of race and thus, be a part of the resistive capacity to reveal the flimsiness of socially constructed categories. Both blackness

and queerness gives us tools to discuss how meaning can be re-coded to give power to the supposedly dispowered (sexual, racial, gender, etc.) minorities of society (Johnson 139, Ferguson 4). In relentlessly (re)enacting our sexualities, often inconsistently, we free ourselves from the "social formations within liberal capitalism" and other systems that trap us (Ferguson 4).

This then, finally, brings us to the central question of spatiality. According to Katherine McKittrick, "black matter are spatial matters" and the space of this so-called "trap"—articulated by Collins as the closet and the prison—the structure where we reside as we wait, presumably, for our freedom—is one that, like the slave ship, speaks to technologies of domination and also locations of "human terror, black resistance, and in some cases, black possession" (McKittrick xii, xi). If unfreedom can be so easily visualized, does freedom have a space then too? Where is queerness held—inside the trap (the closet, the prison) or outside of it? I argue that the trap is a pseudo-illusion, a tool of Muñoz's majoritarian culture. It's positionality of being to the side (of the bedroom, of the jailhouse corridors) or below (the deck and l'esclaverie and the metaphorical pedestal of privilege) is both historically factual and constructed. To explain more exactly what I mean: following in Spillers and Tinsley, I believe that the containment itself is illusion. Queerness, particularly black (in its most capacious sense as ontologically resistive) queerness, is excess. It is not held in the hold or even beyond the hold, in the arbitrary lines drawn around Atlantic waters. Rather, black queerness/queer blackness defies the fungible 3 by 4 by 5 spaces allotted to us on the ship, in the hold, and its many rearticulations as a closet or a cell.

Then what use is there, if any, in still thinking about these spaces, their cramped quarters and angst ridden corners? I do not aim to romanticize these spaces, nor the horrors that took place there. Rather, I believe it is useful to recognize, render visible, these attempts to contain, to make small and hide, to imprison, the black queer/queer black body if only to recognize that the

body of queerness is beyond a physical body. For it is not in the space of the hold itself or the bodies in it, but the process, the acts (or attempted acts) of *holding* (each other) that took place there, that we can examine the liberatory potential and antinormative qualities of queerness. It is in the acts and in the spaces created by the acts that we liberate ourselves. For holding, like the flowing of the Atlantic into the seas it meets and its insistent storming of its way onto land, cannot be contained.

II. Case Studies

Hypodescent

Do not kiss me unless you know this:
Black came before you could say white ain't
Black, back under her, in her, before the wave broke her
Back, brought her back to land where
She sprawled in a pose that did not apologize for going broke.

Crawl, you tell me now,
But the breaking of this wave refuses to let me
And it certainly cannot explain this terrorizing sea—
Why don't you go try to be her or me:
Wonder why water has become some human thing
Like persuasion or passion or the fuzz of peach.
To me, this is all an audible mystery:
Why you score her corpse like music
For a play that takes place under
A minstrel moon—late night
When someone takes a drum and goes
Goema, goema, goema.

And so we're left
Of the track to right but
When you get stuck at the next stop,
I beg you, remember:
(At least) you're almost the last,
And with this bone in your back, maybe,
(Just maybe) you'll find a way to last; ask
For answers to the questions we've been seeking for the better part of a universe.
Then, if you choose none of the ones that make too much sense, only then
Will you kiss us, at last

I. Preface: Vaginal Creme Davis

Internationally renown, intersex-born and genderqueer performance artist Vaginal Creme Davis began her performance practice as a drag queen. She is a mixed race, afrolatina (supposedly conceived in an encounter between her Black American mother and Mexican American father beneath a table during a Ray Charles concert), who was raised in Los Angles during the era of 80's punk rock (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 93). She is known for popularizing the queercore scene and homemade 'zine, as well as performing in a wide variety of drag, from bubblegum pop in her band ¡Cholita! to soul in Afro-Sisters to "terrorist drag," where she performs as the white supremacist militiamen or pathological homosexual-killers.

I open my case studies with "Dr. Davis," a nickname that sits well with Muñoz's reading of her as a Gramscian "organic intellectual," because I believe her practice emphasizes the "theory-making power of performance" that I have laid out in the previous section, and because she utilizes the unique interstice of being both ontologically black and queer and also materially black and queer (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 110).

There are three photographs of Davis that I want to take up in this preface. Shot by bondage and sado-masochistic sex photographer Rick Castro, the photos are untitled but captioned as: "Vaginal Davis as the bad seed," "Vaginal Davis as a lovelorn dominatrix," and "Vaginal Davis." In the "bad seed" photograph, Davis is wearing a facsimile of the light pink, white collared dress that Rhoda Penmark (Patty McCormack) wears in the play-turned-movie *The Bad Seed.* Yet, the Peter Pan collar is swapped for a pointed one, and the patent leather shoes that Rhoda, a young serial killer, is accused of using to kill her schoolmate Claude, are replaced with sharp heels. Davis is on the ground

in the photo, legs crossed but slightly ajar, with the last few of her dress's neck-to-hem buttons undone, exposing her panty-and-stocking covered crotch as she stares stony faced into the camera. When she is performing "lovelorn dominatrix," Davis is half-laying half sitting on the beach, near the water, legs swung to her side, leaning her head on and holding herself up against the fishnet thigh-highs of an unknown set of legs. Appearing again in a blonde wig with bangs, as she did in the "bad seed" photo (though sans ribboned pigtails this time), Davis wears black knee high stockings, held up with studded leather garters, and a leather leotard. Her eyes are closed and lips puckered. In the last photo, "Vaginal Davis," Davis is standing, in black stilletos once more, on what appears to be a cobblestone street; her body is tensed—legs spread and bent, hands hovering on her thighs, and body turned away in a slight sort of upward diagonal motion, hinted at by the way her dreads fall, one swept across her face. She looks ready to take off, eyes trained on something unseen. This time, she is naked save for a white fur bandeau covering her chest and a sort of fur loincloth/miniskirt.

So why am I interested in these photographs? They are not stills from a formal, recorded drag performance, though, because little to no information is available about Davis's relationship to Castro (other than that she is featured in his 1994 film *Three Faces of Women*), it is nearly impossible to know the exact circumstances of their origin. However, there is still a sort of performance of being here. I see in these photos what Muñoz sees in Davis's live performances: counterpublic performances [that] let us imagine models of social relations… [which] do not shy away from the theoretical practice of cultural critique" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 33). Some might argue that because he is the photographer, the sole artist here is Castro. However, I believe that Davis is actually engaging in a set of self-objectifying black queer performances (per Moten and Cervenak).

By presenting her own materially black and queer body as a sexual object—a naked or exposed *thing,* latent with the suggestion of sexual longings that are supposed to be hidden away in the private sphere of aberrant desire—Davis is willfully participating in an unveiling of the supposedly perverse sexual history ascribed to black and queer bodies. Although her body in these photo-performances becomes the object of sexual spectacle, her stony glare in "bad seed," dreamy close-eyed kiss in "lovelorn dominatrix," and her transcendent-seeming state in "Vaginal Davis" all suggest that she, even in the space of objecthood, has power—to gaze back or reject the importance of the gaze all together.

Beyond this ontologically black element, there is an anti-normative commentary evoked by the photos: that one can relish in the failure to live up to white, heteronormative or otherwise majoritarian "ideals"—and orient the body towards what is shamed and away from normalized "comfort" (Ahmed 145). Though this reorientation comes through most clearly in the costuming's heavy reference to deviance, even the positions that Davis's body is in—a cramped leg cross, a barely held up semi-lounge, and an almost-squat—convey Sara Ahmed's understanding of a queer politic: one that is "based on resistance to all norms," where the norm is that which is deemed comfortable (Ahmed 149). The pose in "Vaginal Davis" in particular "cleaves to that… near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" that can be generated by failing to inhabit a subject-position (Ahmed 145, Sedgwick 12). This transformational energy is precisely what I will to locate in the haptic elements of performance case studies that follow. Now that we have a strong foundation on black queer performances of color(s) on which we can rely, I will focus less on asserting how the works themselves can be read as black or queer performances of color(s) and more on the other (dis)incubations that are made possible by of each of the performances.

II. Flowers for Maps: Tracing (Time) Travel

Hammonds House Museum is precisely that: a house that is also a museum. The former home of a prominent black physician, it now features the work of black diaspora artists (Wise 1). It is where went to see Afro-Asian artist Albert Chong's exhibition, which pulls from a portfolio of over thirty years, *Absolute Chong.* Chinese and Black Jamaican, Chong is devoted to shaking the branches of his family tree, "from those of full African descent to [those] who are hybrids to [those] who are all Chinese," and see where they meet (Kina "Jamaican Hybridity" 191). His resulting fascination with family photo albums is obvious in the works that were exhibited at Hammond House. At the time I was struck by the aura of sacredness. I should precede this with the fact that my friend Jojo worked at the time for a Southern art press called *Burnaway,* which had run a review of installation. She sent the article to me along with a message asking if I would like to go see it with her. Naturally, I read the piece. In it, the reviewer harkens back to a 1993 *Los Angeles Times* profile of Chong which noted that his installations made entire rooms into "altar-like environments"; she confirms that this same knack for evoking the hallowed "transformed Hammonds House into … a shrine commemorating multiple layers of the African experience in the New World" (Wise 4). This, then, is perhaps part of the reason that once I saw the exhibit in person, I could not shake or see past the sacred in the installation.

And there is a good argument for how the spiritual exudes from the pieces and fills up the space. Immediately upon entering the living room turned exhibition space, an altar appears: *Aunt Winnie* (1995) is hung above a former fireplace. Flowers and fruit decorate both the re-photographed portrait and the mantel below it. Petals, some plucked or fallen from their heads and others still attached, recur throughout pieces in the exhibit, as do fruits, seeds, and shells. I quickly catalogued these as the ritual objects of Santería, Vodou, Obeah, Candomblé and other

similar syncretic Caribbean religions, thinking nothing more of the cowry shells and skulls that clutter the *ofrendas* (or ancestral offerings) in the *Throne Series* than another allusion to the spiritual world.

Yet returning to the pieces now, with some distance from the initial review-tinted visit and more developed understandings of the haptic, I find a whole new set of possible readings emanating from Chong's work. In fact, I claim that the use of organic components in his work become part of its haptic—"the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work" (Bradley "Sensualities" 129). In this case, this haptic of organics create a conversation with the repetition of family photos and other historical documents and objects. This conversation, and the use of the organic elements more generally, result in a sort of mapmaking—(dis)incubating our notion of cartography, its precision or ability to tell us anything significant about where we come from or where we are. The artworks animate an ability of objects to locate the places and times of memory, and to trace travel between them.

The entire sampling of Chong's work that was exhibited at Hammond House is far too large for me to take on in this section. There were three suites (still life photographs, other portraits taken by the artist in Ethiopia and Jamaica, and the *ofrendas* mentioned earlier) altogether, so I have narrowed my field to only look at what I call his "object collages," which include: *Aunt Winnie* (1995), *The Sisters* (1986), *The Two Sisters* (1987), *Ascension* (1994), *In Memory of James Byrd* (2001) and *My Jamaican Passport* (1992).

The object-collages fashion a set of relations that has the potential to explore geography as an "*imbrication* of material and metaphorical space" (Katz 79). This figurative overlapping is embodied in the literal layering of organic matter onto photographs (usually family portraits) or other "identifying" objects (that recall a specific person). The skulls, bones, rawhide, hair, horns,

shells, leaves, fruit, and, most especially flowers, do more work in these pieces than referencing either the sacred or what Chong's artist statement calls "our rapidly disintegrating relationship to natural world." Their reappearance across these works suggests a potential tracing of Chong's family's geography—"as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations"—to create a time-sensitive (more on this term later) map (McKittrick x). The geography I am conceiving of here is not one that charts physical land in order to find the subject's location on it or its position in relation to other subject-places. No, that is the historical work of hegemonic geography and geographers, one of "white masculine European mappings, explorations, conquests, is interlaced with a … sense of place" that is constructed on a logics of what can be termed "rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands" (McKittrick x).

The bricolages layer story-objects on person-objects—many of which share both classifications. To understand what I mean by this, let us turn to *Aunt Winnie.* In the piece, there is a photograph of Chong's aunt, holding what appears to be a pair of vinyl records or large books side by side; as such, before even adding another object placed by Chong onto the photograph, we can already see the ease with which story-object and person-object coexist and exist-as-both. Royal purple blossoms line the four edges of the photo, while a green and yellow star-fruit-esque flower adorns her white top. Two blush-plump orchids kiss in the bottom right-hand corner of the piece, and three sets of dried white petals resembling narrow scapulae—perhaps lilies? (I admit without hesitation that my eye is untrained in botany)—finish her framing in the other three. The partially white flower in the center unmistakably resembles a heart-symbol's shape, and its bottom half being such a deep red stirs up images of an organ draining of blood. This center flower can be read a story-object then, perhaps referring to how

the artist's aunt suffered a long, loveless marriage. Even without the factual confirmation of my reading provided by Chong's artist statement, we can see how the organic haptic provides material for this "doubled" portraiture, or portrait re-made portrait again, to be an new interplay of persons and stories (for it is not the presence of actual stories themselves, but the conditons for their possibility that is important).

The monochromatic object-collage *The Sisters* takes up this same inteplay. This work is particularly suited to explaining how the organic haptic works with the other materialities in the collages to "critique of cartographic conventions of positioning, framing, scale, absense and presence on the map, and, a critique of the absent, if ominiscient, cartographer" (Katz 69). *The Sisters* features a line of three height-ordered girls in a photograph, placed under a bent-rose-stem-roof, on a placesetting of dried leaves, roses petals, a bone, and two tiny black plastic babies and tarnished silverware. "Our historical geographies, and the ways in which we make and know space now, are connected; they are held together by … 'a series of remapping exercises in which various land spaces are located within an orbit of control,'" but *The Sisters* loosens those fastening by not mapping without locating or controlling any specific land space (McKittrick xviii). Instead, items like the cowry shells call up the discursive formation of the Caribbean, in order to allow the crocus-sack (or burlap) backdrop to stir up the historical memory of the sugar sack—something that has personal history for Chong's family (they ran a confectionery business in Kingston) within a larger, rather history of the sugar in the Caribbean. This speaks both to the organic story-objects' ability to locate the places of memory that provide a family and community geography and their inability, or rather refusal, to pinpoint a specific location and articulate its positioning in any sort of Cartesian field.

In fact, the whole set of works I conjure here "not only refuse a comfortable belonging to nation, or country, or a local street, [but] alters them by demonstrating that geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing," something the Chong himself articulates in his artist statement as a "human visual intuition that operates at levels inhospitable to verbal or literary expression." If we turn to another monochormatic piece, a "sister piece" to the last, we begin to see how these works come together to actually chart not only single memories, but a traveling over time. *The Two Sisters* offers very little in terms of a sheer mass of organic haptic. Yet the smattering of very small seed-like petals across the photograph of the young girls in matching frilly white puffsleeved dresses and velcro shoes, seems to be a set of story-objects, existing in varied distance from each other and the concentrations of petals (in form of small piles and a few flower heads) in a way that recall diaspora. The same photograph from *The Two Sisters* is used in the color still life *Ascension*. But even though this person-object remains the same, the relational field of story-objects is shifted completely. Earlier in the thesis I called the maps imagined by Chong's work "time-sensitive"; *Ascensions'* use of different materials from the organic haptic actually collages time in one piece. The varied temporalities aroused by seeds juxtaposed with the ripe fruit, in conversation with rot and skeletons and brittle, broken blossoms creates a map not of locations, but of time cycles. Though the intervention into the charting of time as universal is more obvious in *Ascensions,* it also exists across the works. The collection as a whole rejects the notion that any geography of time and space is "secure and unwavering" (McKittrick xvi). The mix of the organic haptic with government documents, advertisements, and "signs of colonial production in the Caribbean: stubbed-out cigars and empty liquor bottles" articulates both a post-colonial awareness of how power influences both geographies and a sensitivity to the multiplicity of time (Wise 12).

Chong's maps are not about recording history. Rather, as is revealed by *My Jamaican Passport* and *In Memory of James Boyd,* they are partaking in remembering and in legacy-making. *My Jamaican Passport*, which is a print of precisely that, Chong's passport opened to the page where his photo is. The travel document is accompanied by cowry shells in the box where one is meant to fix a photo of their wife. This is yet another example of how the organic manifests as a person object. But what's more is that by reusing a particular set of organic materials, in this case the shells used in the other pieces such as *The Sisters* and other works, Chong is inserting himself and others into the family geography. *In Memory of James Byrd,* which depicts the rose crowned license plate from the pick up truck of a white supremacist who dragged the piece's namesake to death in 1998 in Texas, expands the family geography, once again, beyond blood relations. The border of roses is reminiscent of the "roof" in *The Sisters* and the tomatillo pods appear in the other works as well. The organic haptic then forms what Frances A. Yates posits in *The Art of Memory* is a "loci" of memory. She writes:

> "The formation of the loci is of the greatest importance, for the same set of loci can be used again and again for remembering different material. The images we [placed] on them for remembering one set of things fade… [but] the loci remains in the memory and can be used again by placing another set of images, another set of materials." (Yates 23)

Thus, Chong's object colleges use the meaning that the components of the organic haptic accumulates (through their repeated use) meaning, to create a series of maps that in turn become "a legacy, … that which carries 'living effects, seething and lingering, of what *seems* over and done with" (McKittrick xviii).

"Insofar as mapping involves exploration, selection, definition, generalization and translation of data, it assumes a range of social cum representational powers, and as the military histories of geography and cartography suggest, the power to map can be closely entwined with the power of conquest and social control" (Katz 69). Yet, Chong (whose community/family and

self supposedly exist in the "powerless" side of this formulation), (dis)incubates those dominant map-making formulas that think of charting travel as no more than the linear trajectory between two locations. By remaking geographies using the organic, in conversation with other person-objects and icons of oppressive histories, he disrupts "geography's discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space 'just is,'"—existing as an immutable backdrop or container for human interaction; and creates instead a visual family geography that travels memory in order to impart legacy (McKittrick xi).

III. [Mythical Realities / Real Mythologies] & Strange Eggs

Black and Indian American artist Mequitta Ahuja's automythographic self-portraits are explosion. They go beyond being *explosive* (though certainly they are) to embodying the overflowing blast, the suspension of pre-debris, at the moment of a detonation. *Dream Region* (2009), *Spark* (2009), and *Fount* (2009) are all "pieces of a larger body of work in which [she uses] two central devices: inversion of the head and exaggeration of the hair" (Kina 198). The inversion of the head disorients the viewer's relationship to the works as portraits, choosing not invite the person-assumed-subject into the art object. Instead the art object departs from the traditional form of portraiture (one that attempts to capture a subject in a series of brushstrokes or frames) and instantly forces an act of (non)sense-making on its viewer: a result of reorganizing the logics of central/marginal, liminal/concrete, subject/object, and mythical/real.

The haptic explosions—evoking everything from cloth and yarn to smoke and wires, tangling tentacle messes—force the viewer into (non)sense making of the image-experience. The feeling of explosion is so disorienting for the viewer/victim that it is impossible to make sense of it. Understanding what exactly exists in the piece is a difficult task that also lacks urgency. In

such, the pieces remake the Real, as Lacan thinks of it—authentic unchangeable truths in reference both to being/the Self and the external dimension of experience (Harris 167). The pieces (dis)incubate the Real, invoking the imaginary, mythology, and presence/absences—all things opposed to his conception of a "traumatic that is chararterized by impossibility."

The first way that the pieces do this is by taking up the liminal/concrete and real/mythological presence of black hair. Despite the presence of persons/bodies in the frames of all of these works, the mass of material at the center of each piece (which reorganizes the hierarchy between object and supposed-subject/person) is hair, specifically an afro. By granting importance to liminal space of hair over the remainder of the flesh-body, Ahuja (dis)incubates the desires of portraiture. In doing so, she, like Chong, exposes the flimsy line between portraiture and still life, all while using their trappings to depart to a performative: something that transfers an experience (in this of explosion). Moreover, she signals a shift from the real to the imagined, "from the biographical to the automythic" (Kina 198).

In these pieces, hair is remade through exaggeration. Its attachment to human forms maintains its being as hair, even while it is physically and conceptually redrawn as some other mass. The artist puts forth in an interview that the "exaggeration of the hair is a response to the history of Black hair as a barometer of social and personal consciousness," and the work illustrates the "psychic" proportions that hair both has and is imagined to have in black life (Kina 198). Her approach "sets the stage for the complex and disintegrative birth of the work of art, which gives form not to an ideal [rendering of figure… but 'a living object'" (Harris 170). It calls upon the "real" and "mythological" ability of black hair to explode.

Within her drawings of the absences that allow for the volume of black hair, Ahuja creates organic lines which compose the unintelligible materiality of the explosions—the wires,

the smoke, the droplets, etc. But on closer inspection, we see a series of roundness—preceded by the curls of the actual hair." I read these strange eggs and use them to "imagine the birth of the work as the beginning of an internal development or unfolding, just like that of the spectator who stands before it (Harris 168). The egg's edges, the lines, the borders, the membranes, is not a support as it was for Lacan, an addendum the individuated figure/subject must break through and break free from if it. The eggs do not suggest that birth is an experience of separation and detachment but rather "an expansion through interpenetration," felt here even beyond the confines of the pages.

IV. Mud-tying Genealogies

For this final case study, I continue to draw upon the methodologies of performance, but also shift slightly towards critical theories in literary criticism in order to accommodate the performance's mode as written poetry. Black and white American mix-raced poet Natasha Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize winning collection *Native Guard* reconfigures mud (which I take up as its crucial haptic element) as an agential one. In this theoretically black practice, mud is an "object that speaks," and I argue that by a sonic (or phonic) linking of the words mud, mutt, and mulattx (a neologism where the x is a gender inclusive ending that can be easily substituted for an feminine a or masculine o), we eventually find that the mulattx speaks as well (Moten 14). Following the hapticality of mud in the poems "Graveyard Blues," "Pilgrimage," "Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi," and "South," provides an opportunity to begin understanding how the material of mud and the figure of the mulattx are constructed as fugitive objects, exerting Moten's "dispossessive force" both predicated on and (re)creating the material conditions surrounding them. In arguing for the (black, queer) linguistic family that is offered by

the text and the words' sociohistorical history, I find that there is a troubling of etymology and nativity that (dis)incubates genealogies based on arboreal filiation models.

Let us begin with mud. This soft, sticky matter, resulting from the mixing of the two skins of the earth (soil and water), allows me first situate Trethewey's book in its sociohistorical context. It is set in the South, particularly evoking the Native Guard's Louisiana and Trethewey's home state of Mississippi. When it comes to (the) Mississippi, mud has its own history. Conceptually, it is a discursive formation that functions signifier of place, with the South's mud was always juxtaposed to the rockier soil of the North (Yaeger 40). More concretely though,mud is the matter of the Mississippi delta, an accumulation of river's dirt at the point where the water returns to itself.

Mud provides a generative materiality, a textured "sensuality," that may prove a useful foundation for approaching its manifestiations in *Native Guard* (Bradley "Sensualities" 119). What I mean by this is that it offers itself as a singular, though naturally hybrid, material that can be utilized as a way of seeing or knowing that exceeds the conventions of literary analysis. Mud is a "shapeshifter," the word used by Aimee Meredith Cox both as "a term to talk about the mutable nature of molecules and genes" and an allegory for the black feminine. Mud transforms constantly; from wet to dry to something in between, which can be molded, used to cast, and cast its own molds, too. It slides— the more dangerous follow up to the waters of a flood that can causes trees to wash away and buildings to wash away. It is embodies black fugitivity (a term where both words are synonymous) in this "separation from settling" (Harney 11). Mud also seals itself onto other objects (something Trethewey actually reflects on in her memoir *Beyond Katrina*) and can seal objects together. As we follow it through the collection, we can see the ways in which it allows the potentially disparate personal and political projects of the book

(mourning her mother's early death, laying the soldiers of the Native Guard to rest, and commenting on the history of Southern miscegenation laws and her own mixed race heritage) to come together—not perfectly or permanently marrying them, but rather allowing them hold fast together at moments.

Mud appears early on in the collection. In the poem "Graveyard Blues," "the suck of mud" pulls at the speaker's feet as she walks to lay her mother to rest. This animated nature of the mud highlights and heightening its agentiality—its ability, even in its nonsentitent object form—to affect human movement. In "Pilgrimage," mud "carves" the river's path and its movement is how the "bones of ships" come up. In other words, mud offers the opportunity for skeletons to arise in a way that is almost paradoxical to Trethewey's project of memorialization and putting to rest. In section 3 of "Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi," titled "Flood," the "muddy cleft between barge and dry land" is the focus of the Native Guard's gaze—they study it carefully, wondering if it will allow them to cross. Here, too, mud determines what humans can do and it's liminal qualities make it difficult to ascertain what it might allow. Finally in "South," the last poem in the collection in which the self-identified mulattx figure returns home, Trethewey writes, "I return / to Mississippi, state that made a crime / of me – mulatto, half-breed—native / in my native land, this place they'll bury me." Though mud doesn't make an explicit appearance here, by this point in the collection it has become native to Mississippi. Furthermore, the mulattx figure is being buried, and in the same way that association easily brings to mind dirt (mud's material cousin), the word "mulatto's" sonic and symbolic cousin, the "mutt" is evoked.

In order to explicate this last claim, I will now (more fully) construct my phono-social genealogy of mud/mud via the Oxford English Dictionary. Aside from its primary definition as

the “moist glutinous material resulting from the mixing of water with soil,” mud can be defined as “something regarded as base, worthless, or polluting… something liable to perplex or confound” (OED mud, n.1) The figurative definition also includes: “information or allegations regarded as damaging or scandalous” (OED mud, n.1). From mud, we can easily reach for its phonetically dizygotic twin, the near-homophone “mutt” which is defined as United States derogatory slang for (1) a slow racehorse or any horse in poor condition, (2) a mongrel—more on this in a moment—(3) an awkward, ignorant, blundering or incompetent person or fool and (4) an unattractive woman (OED mutt, n.1). While all of these have the potential to be linked to either mutt or mulattx—(1) by the well-known etymology for mulatto coming from the Spanish and Portuguse for mule (a “failed horse” of sorts), (3) to the definition of mud as base or worthless or (4) through the “gendered racial dynamics” of assigning beauty and desire—I believe that (2), mongrel, is the most useful bridge between “mud” and “mulattx.” The word mongrel is a likewise derogatory synonym of mutt, that can be, like mulattx, either a noun and adjective. The primary definition includes a broad definition: “the result of cross-breeding, miscegenation, mixed marriage, etc.” and a more specific to animals iteration, which is a dog with either parents of different breeds or one of no definable breeding due to various crossings (also, sometimes, the offspring of a wolf and a dog) (OED mongrel, n.1) A secondary definition reads, “a thing of mixed or intermediate character; a mixture; a combination of two (or ocassionally more) different things, qualities, etc,” thus making an easy gesture back to mud (OED mongrel n.4). Because mongrel is equal to mutt, the link from mutt to mulattx (mulatto in the dictionary)—“ a person of mixed race,” usually having one white and one black parent—is intuitive. It is only further strengthened by the aforementioned etymological lineage of mulattx to the mule, a cross between a horse and donkey that resonates with the (reductive and

mythologized) model of a hybrid between two "different parents" (i.e. water/soil; breed a/breed b or wolf/dog; black/white) that run through all the definitions. The logics of hypodescent are obvious here, too, as mud is always considered more "of dirt" than of water, a mutt more thought of as dog than wolf, and mulattx ever black.

Though you cannot find these words anywhere in each other's Oxford English Dictionary entries, I believe I have sufficiently made the case for their relation—one that is based on both sound and socio-historically assigned meanings. I'd like to call upon some quotations from the papers of Thomas Jefferson, whose own relationship to black mixed race lineage is fraught, as a channel into my concluding thoughts on the black (fugitive)/queer (dis)incubation that *Native Guard* has allowed for. When describing some muddy areas along the Rhine River in his *Notes of a Tour Through Holland and the Rhine Valley, 3 March-23 April 1788* (1956), Jefferson writes that they have "a Southern aspect, the soil a barren mulatto clay, mixed with a good deal of slate" and that the plains are "sometimes black, sometimes mulatto, always rich." I won't, despite temptation, dwell on the poetics of these excerpts and instead quickly arrive at the theoretical implications. In ascribing Southern, "mulatto" qualities to the clay he witnesses, Jefferson troubles whether the land describes the new-born native or if the now-native (to another place, granted) describes the land. In an undoing of the usual formulation, in which the subject names the land and is named by it, here object describes object. The objecthood of the mud/mutt/mulattx is so birthed—with a sort of impermanent, hybrid, and fugitive nativity.

Thus, *Native Guard*, and the prospects it offers for tracing a black and queer sonic genealogy from "mud" to "mutt" to "mulattx" where an etymological parentage does not exist, (dis)incubates our understanding of and privileging of filiation, especially that which is "unbroken and pure" (Glissant 56). The rhizomatic relationship of the words to each other is a

queer genealogy. The roots connect in complicated ways that oppose mythological and vertical logics of the arboreal (Glissant 16). By shunning etymology as the primary affiliation between words, we are now available to (dis)incubate from the racist, cis-hetero-sexist sensibilities of bloodlines. In other words, we have the tools to make the claim that Spillers does, that:

> "The 'blood' to which [people] speak has little to do with the scientific, even when they hint, and perhaps all the more so, mensurative dimensions of the substance, as one-half, one-fourth, one-either "black." It appears that medical and scientific knowledge, after all, are not the arbiters of the blood *where we live,* nor the origin of recourse when genealogies, or the "transfer" of time through children and properties are concerned." (Spillers "Notes" 183)

But even more importantly, we rid ourselves of the impossibility of changing the reality that "blood remains impervious, at the level of folk/myth, to incursions of the 'reasonable' and inscribes the unique barrier beyond which human community has not passed into [religion]" (Spillers, "Notes" 183). We can imagine ways to rid ourselves of the "difficulty of the blood [being] is the hinge upon which the concept of community, as we now understand it, appear to turn [and] extends itself" and find, as I have modeled, new relations to each other, as black queer objects (Spillers, "Notes" 183).

Coda: Notes on Ana Mendieta, Beyoncé, and Ontological Femininity

This thesis is its own performance, a rogue fugue in D minor; it is a contrapuntal composition with (dis)incubations as its principle subject. This fugal subject first appears in the introduction and then is successively taken up by other voice parts. These voices, sometimes dovetailing and other times diverging, come in the form of my case studies. While each voice sings of the fugal subject, they deviate in their conclusions, and the counterpoints they create are what results in an interesting piece.

As such, I have chosen to forgo a traditional conclusion section (one that simply restates deductions as an established form of ending) in favor of this coda—a passage that brings my movement to conclusion through prolongation. This musical gesture drives home my theoretical tonic: the black and the queer. Rather than reiterating the melodic lines of haptic possibility that you've already heard about, I extend my score to artists Ana Mendieta and Beyoncé, in hopes that these last bars will not be a repetition of the theme but rather a new phrasing that takes away any question of its key: ontological being.

Instead of reading exact pieces by Beyoncé and Ana Mendieta at length, I take two of "collected series" of sorts. For Beyoncé, this is the visual album, *Lemonade,* which is able to be viewed one full-length film but also as the collection of songs and videos that a visual album inherently is. The second collected work is Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas,* a meeting of the geographies of land and human body that take place, over a series of years, usually in isolation and then are photographed and displayed (Quiroga 183).

I pick up with *Lemonade* where my last movement left off. The mulattx and other hybrids often bring up the question of futurity, or the imagining of what is to come and how it will sustain or change our social realities. Queerness has a similarly anxiety-ridden relationship with futurity, explored by both Lee Edleman and Jose Muñoz. These anxieties about reproducing

social realities come to a head when we turn to Mendieta and Beyoncé simply by way of their bodies—which are so central to the work—being ones that are capable of biological reproduction.

This thesis has appropriated the use of the word "incubation" away from its biological origins—specifically because the logics of the field are so racist and gender essentialist. However, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the bodies capable of reproduction as, under Fineman, "vulnerable" ones. Though all humans have vulnerability in common, Beyoncé and Mendieta embody a sort of ontological femininity that puts them more squarely in the space of a "vulnerable subject" (or person). They act out Fineman's argument that those who are vulnerable "should be at the center of our political and theoretical endeavors" (Fineman 2). Beyoncé does this by populating *Lemonade* with almost exclusively black women and girls, who are at the bottom of societies' overlapping oppressions. Mendieta, though easily, read racially as a "white Cuban" embodies vulnerability in her work as well, not by presenting a vulnerable body itself, but by calling upon the vulnerability of her own body in the *Siluetas* (Quiroga 183). She puts her body in scarred land and uses it to scar land in a way that resists the divide between the land and certain bodies.

In fact, the female body and the black body have historically been read as parts of the earth—logics that helped ensure their (supposed) domination by the "subjects" placed in opposition to and above them. However, taking into account these well-known and problematic conceptualizations of black people and women as having an inherent link to the land, by inhabitating the earth itself—its waters, its shores, its fields, Beyoncé and Ana Mendieta (dis)incubate the reading of landscape as separate from body. They remake the human as part of

the land, of the world. As such, these onotologically black, queer, and feminine performers (dis)incubate our very foundations of a social worlds as separate from the natural earth.

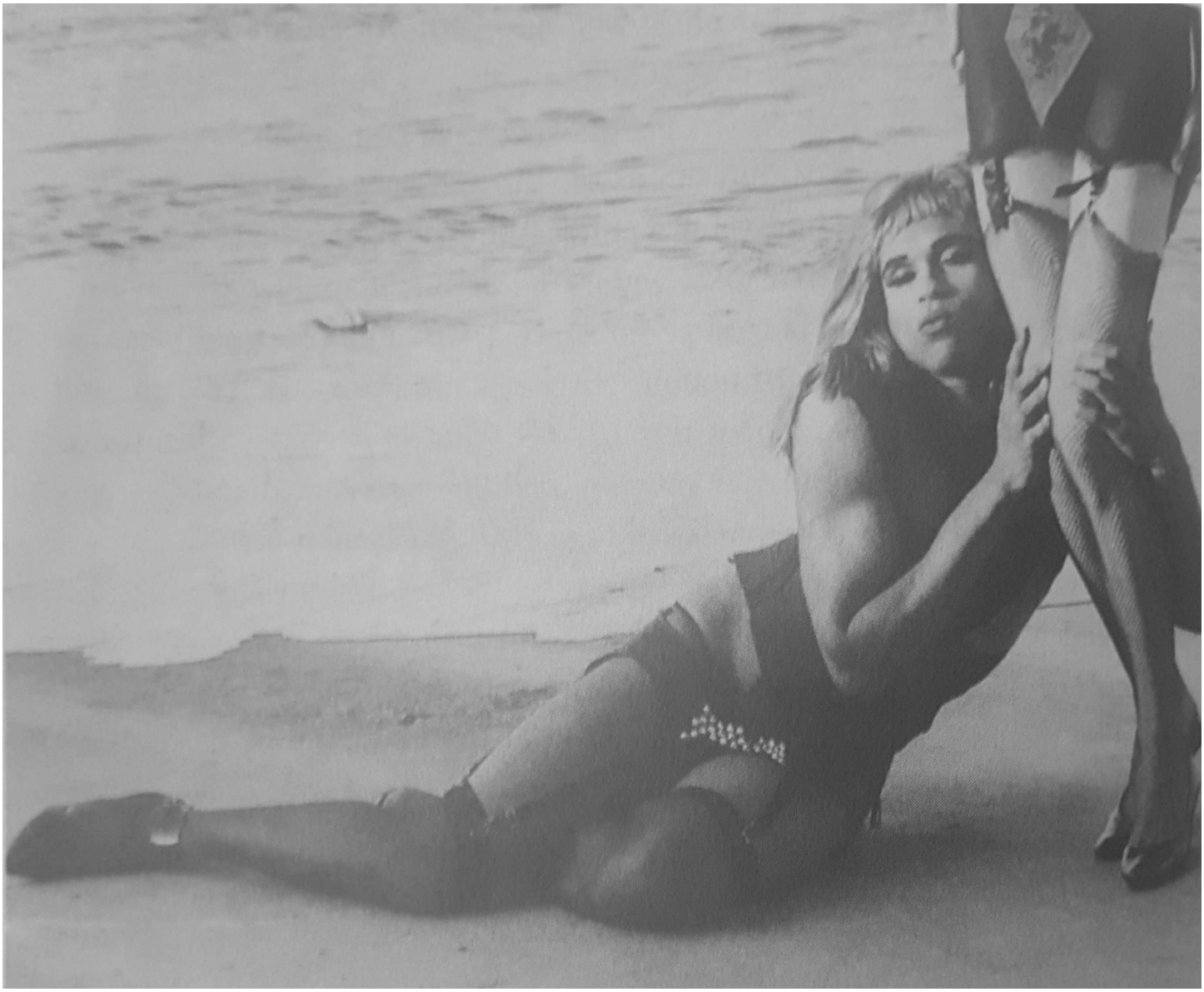
Appendix

Note: This appendix is meant to provide visuals or stills of the performances that I describe in "Section II. Case Studies" and "Coda: Notes on Ana Mendieta, Beyoncé, and Ontological Femininity." They are organized by performer name and in the order of appearance in the thesis. For ease of viewing, there are no pages with more than one work (though on some occasions, a single work will span several pages, whether due to my desire to provide detail enlargements or because of the length of the original piece.

Vaginal Creme Davis

1. *Vaginal Davis as the bad seed,* n.d. Photograph by Rick Castro.

2. *Vaginal Davis as lovelorn dominatrix*, n.d. Photograph by Rick Castro.



3. *Vaginal Davis,* n.d. Photograph by Rick Castro.

Albert Chong

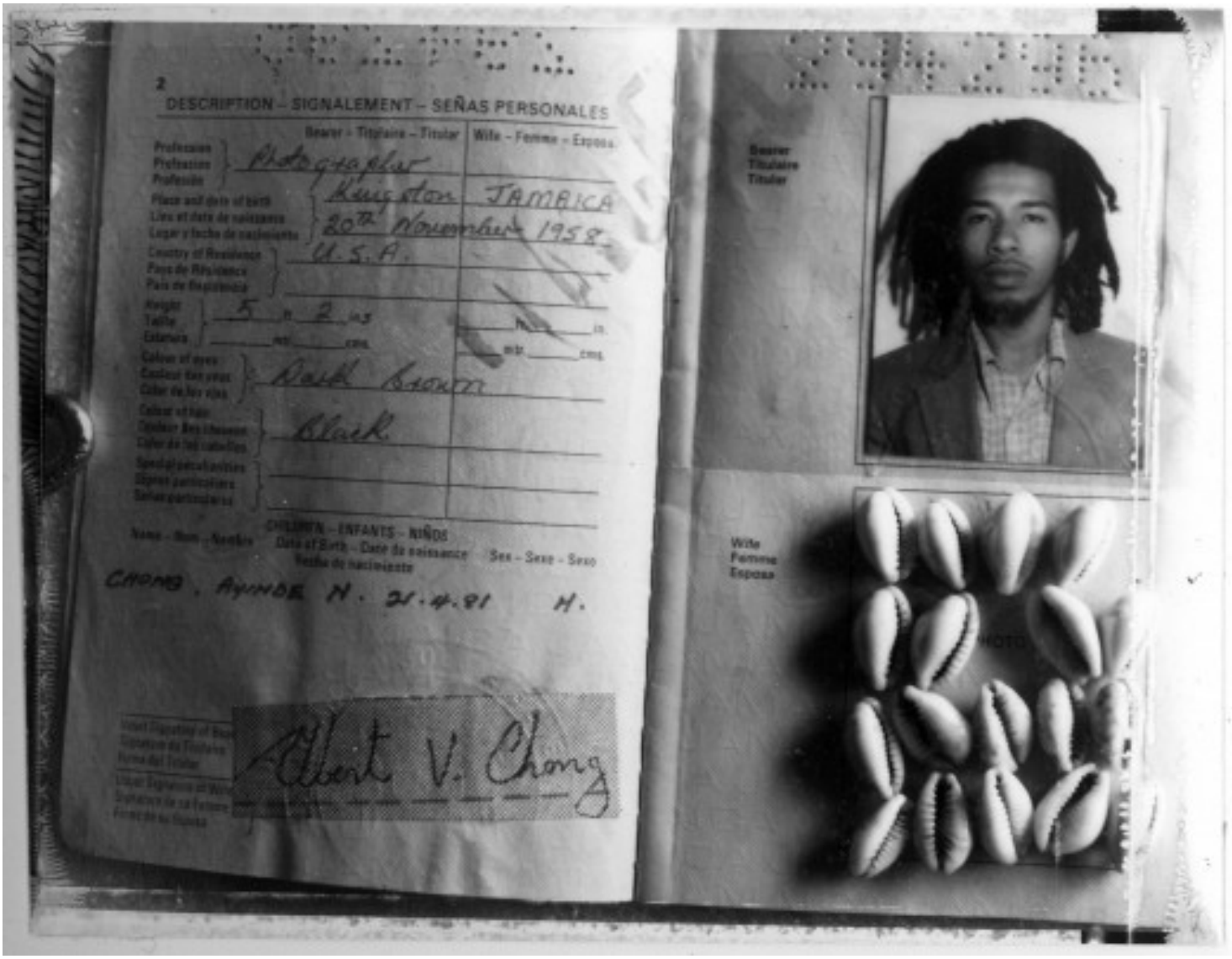
1. *Aunt Winnie,* 1995. Inket on canvas.

2. *The Sisters,* 1986. Gelatin silver print.

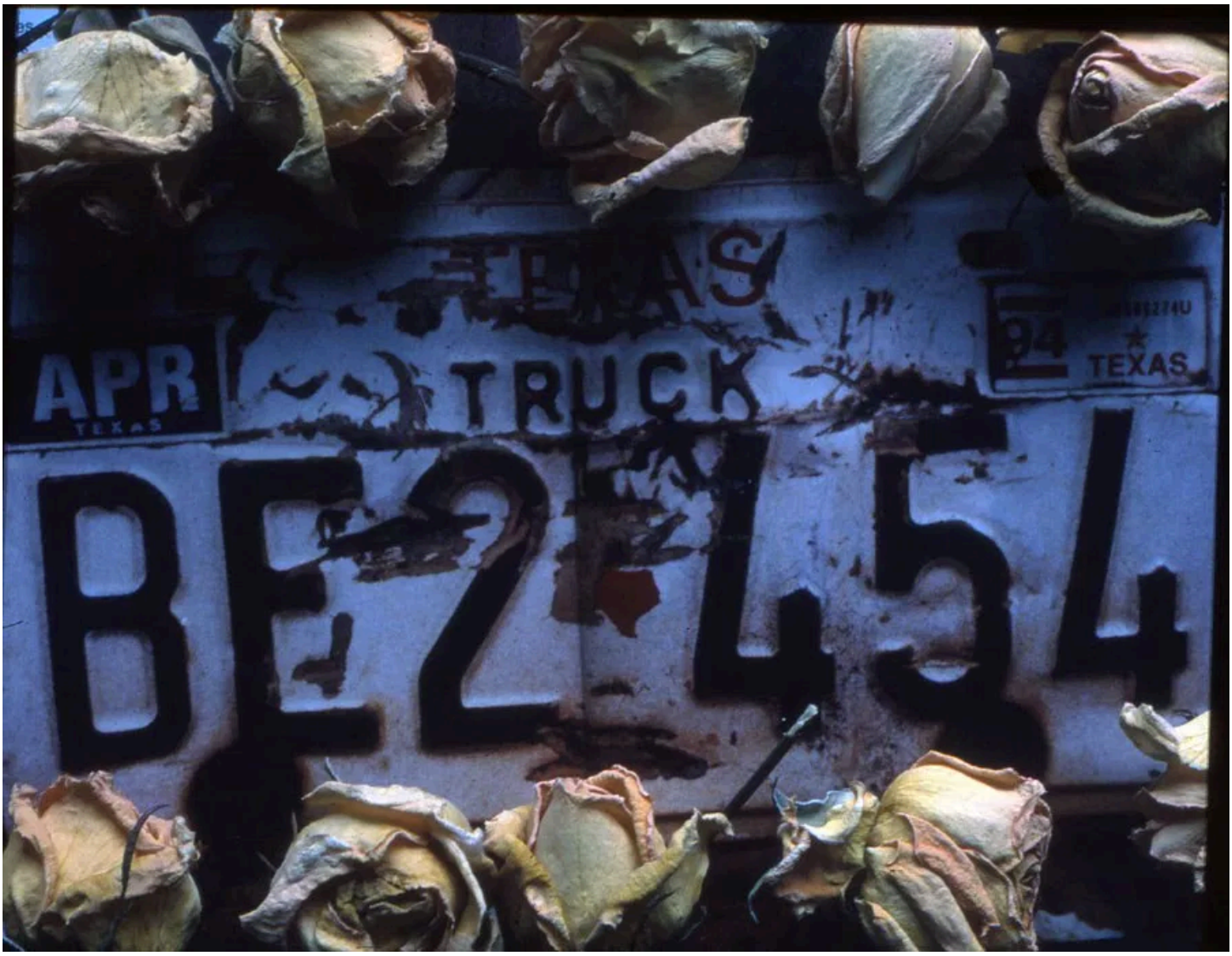
3. *The Two Sisters,* 1987. Gelatin silver print.

4. *Ascension,* 1994. Lightjet print.

5. *My Jamaican Passport,* 1992. Gelatin silver print.



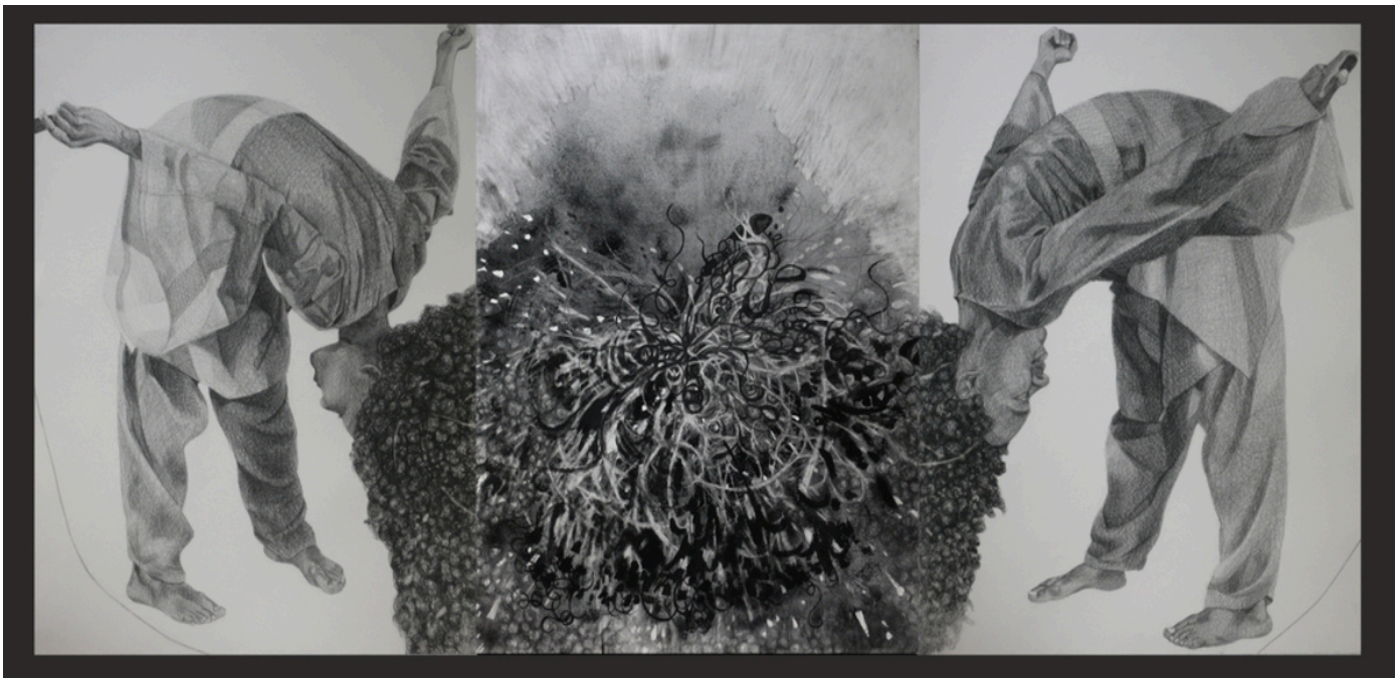
6. *In Memory of James Byrd,* 2001. Inkjet print.



Mequitta Ahuja

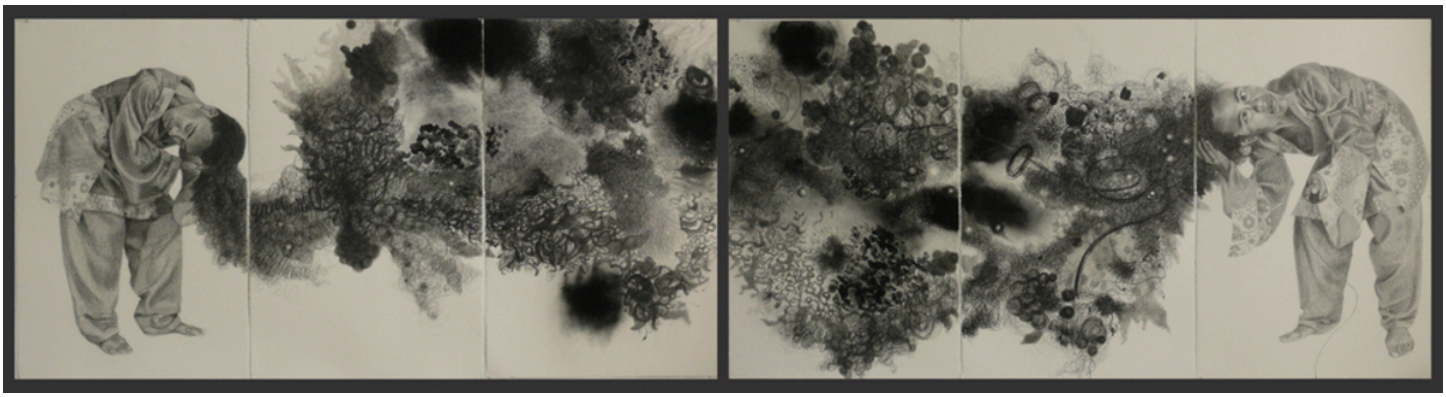
1. *Dream Region*, 2009. Oil, enamel, arcrylic, and waxy chalk on paper.

2. *Spark,* 2009. Waxy chalk on paper.



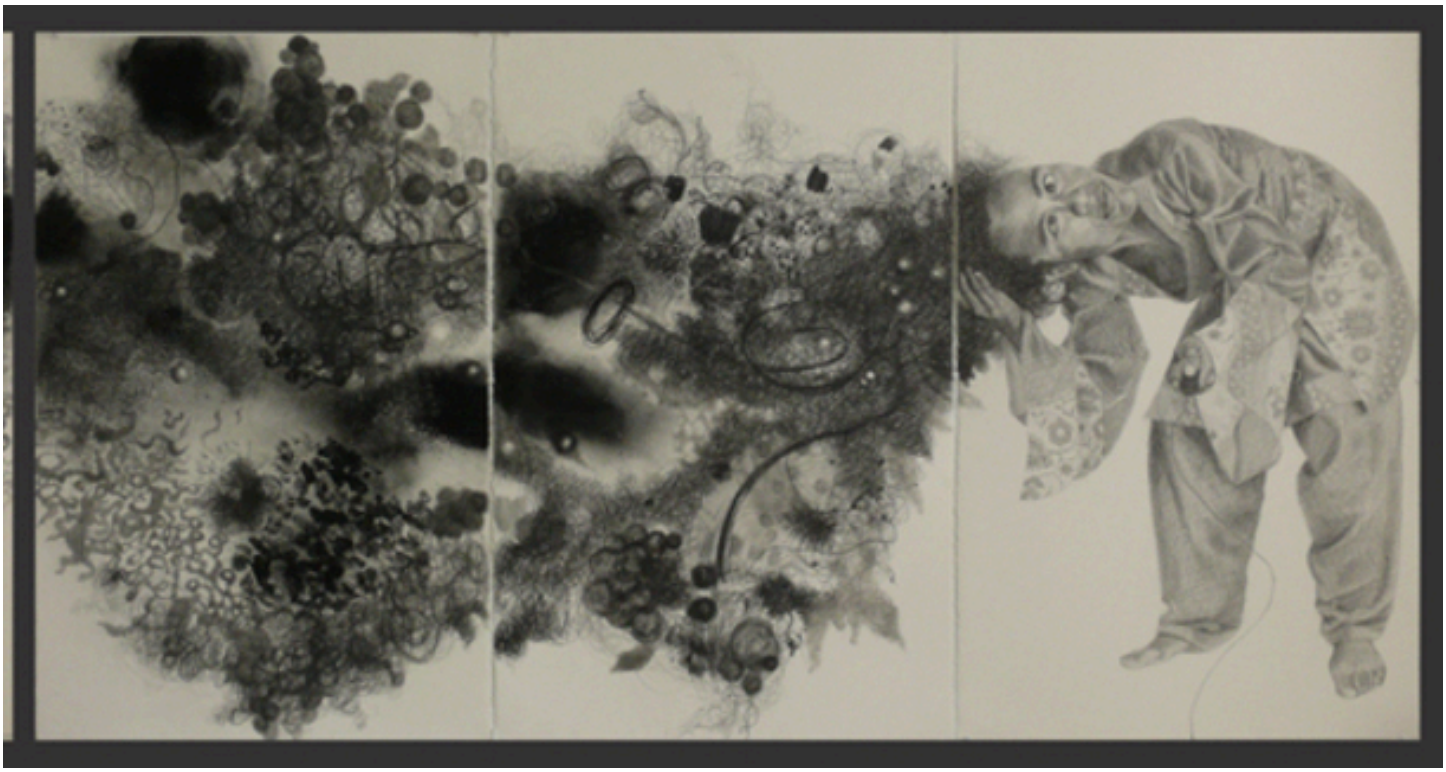
(Center Detail)

3. *Fount,* 2009. Waxy chalk on paper.

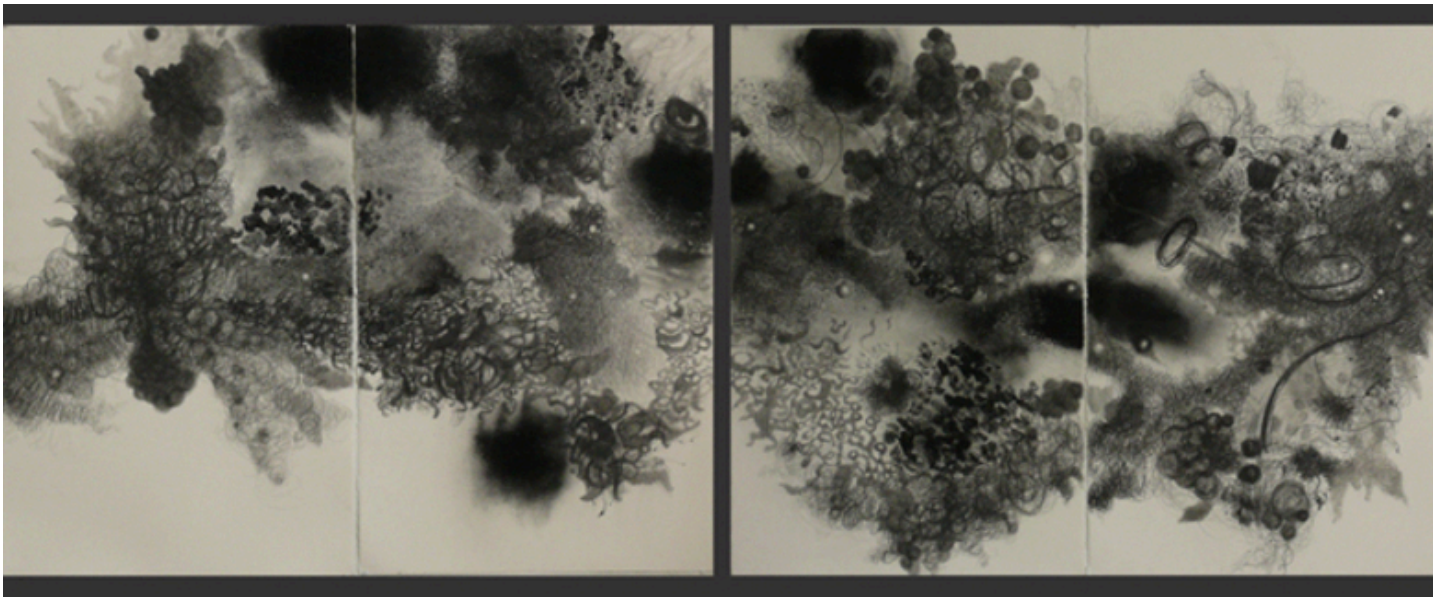


(Left Detail)

Fount (continued)



(Right detail)



(Center detail)

Beyoncé

Lemonade, 2016. Video performance (stills).

Lemonade (continued)

Lemonade (continued)

Ana Mendieta

Siluetas, 1973-1980. Series of photographed body art installations.

Siluetas (continued)

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