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Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

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Do or Die: Affect, FRitual, Resistance

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M.A., Emory University, 2017

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts
2018.

Abstract

Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance
By Fahamu Pecou

Historically, a threat—both physical and social—has worked to control and coerce Black subjectivity into the prevailing social order. This threat of violence and death is woven into the cultural fabric of society and remains so pervasive that it has become a kind of spectacle; a spectacle of Black death. My dissertation, "Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance" is a visual dissertation that privileges the affective and phenomenological language of art and ritual to counter this spectacle while encouraging new modes of communication, understanding, and resistance. "Do or Die: Affect Ritual Resistance" re-members Black subjectivity through an interrogation of the Black body, mind, and spirit, represented respectively through concepts inherent to hip hop culture, Négritude, and Ifa (Yoruba spiritual cosmology).

This visual dissertation features original artworks-as-texts which function in opposition to the overwhelming societal forces that maintain brutal and dehumanizing assaults on the Black body. As narratives within visual culture continue to depict Black bodies as dead or dying, "Do or Die" explores concepts and themes that ultimately, reorient the Black experience around death.

Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

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Attachments:

Emmett Still: A Short Film by Fahamu Pecou (digital video)

Pecou, F., Mason K. (Producers). (2016).

Emmett Still: Original Soundtrack (audio)

Pecou, F., Mason K. (Producers). (2016).

Do or Die Fahamu Pecou Charleston 2016 (digital video)

Peart, B. (Videographer). (2016).

Opening Processional/Opening Performance, Halsey Institute of Contemporary

Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance (photography)

Karson Photography (Photographer). (2016).

Credits / Permissions:

Photography:

All images photographed by Fahamu Pecou except where noted.

Photography by Karson Photography used with permission by the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.

Video:
Emmett Still: A Short Film by Fahamu Pecou
Pecou F., Mason K.(Producers). (2016). Emmett Still [DVD].

Written and Directed by
Fahamu Pecou

Director of Photography
Maurice Evans

Editor:
Maurice Evans
Fahamu Pecou

Titles and animation:
Kyle D. Hill

Starring:
God
MALIK AKINS

God's friends
KYLE HILL
SERMANU WHITTEN
DERRICK BRILEY

Pretty Ladies
TSEHAI MESSIAH
AMEI THOMPSON

Police Officer
STEVE AVERY

Dancers

CHARISSE M. WILLIAMS
XAVIER “AUBURN AVE” STANFORD
TSEHAI MESSIAH
AMEI THOMPSON

Drummers
OMOLEWA PERRY
KWABENA JOHNSON
TREVOR “BABA DARE” SMALL

Egun
FAHAMU PECOU

God’s Girlfriend
YOMI

Audio
EMMETT STILL: The Original Short Film Soundtrack features original music performed by Fahamu Pecou and guests Killer Mike, Okorie Johnson, Ekundayo, DFocis and AllenTheHuman.

01 *Strange Frui*t
Performed by Fahamu Pecou and AllentheHuman with Okorie Johnson on cello
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP) and Allen Michael Coe

02 *EMMETT STILL*
Performed by Fahamu Pecou and Killer Mike
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP), Michael Render (Aniyah’s Music/ASCAP), Mark Brown (Mark Jr/ ASCAP), Ekundayo Donnegan (Nyame Dua Publishing/ASCAP).
Features a snippet from Cambridge University’s 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William Buckley titled “Is the American Dream at the Expense of the Negro”.

03 *Flight of the Ancestors*
Performed by Fahamu Pecou, DFocis, and Ekundayo
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP), Mark Brown (Mark Jr/ ASCAP), Ekundayo Donnegan (Nyame Dua Publishing ASCAP)

04 *GOD*
Performed by Fahamu Pecou
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP).
Features a snippet from the September 2013 BBC 1Extra interview of Kanye West.

All tracks produced by Brian Harrison aka NERDPAC (Read or Die).

Recorded*, Mixed and Mastered by Amond Jackson at Salem Psalms Studios in Atlanta, GA.
*Killer Mike's vocals recorded by Leon Kelly at Pantherkill Studios, Phoenicia, NY.


EMANUEL A.M.E. CHURCH
FOUNDED 1818 BY THE REVEREND MORRIS BROWN
CLOSED BY STATE LAW 1834, REOPENED BY THE REVEREND H. CAIN 1865
PRESENT EDIFICE BUILT BY THE REVEREND J.B. NICHOLS 1891
REDECORATION BY THE REVEREND F.R. VEAL 1949
THE RIGHT REVEREND E.W. REID, BISHOP

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

> You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing… So if you can overcome the personal fear of death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you are on your way.
>
> —Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like.*

Cover Image: *New World Egungun Procession*. Karson Photography

Esu,

Esu Odara,

Esu lanlu ogirioko.

Okunrin ori ita,

A jo langa langa lalu.

A rin lanja lanja lalu.

Ode ibi ija de mole.

Ija ni otaru ba d'ele Ife.

To fi de omo won.

Oro Esu to to to akoni.

Ao fi ida re lale.

Esu ma se mi o.

Esu ma se mi o.

Esu ma se mi o.

Omo elomiran ni ko lo se.

Pa ado asubi da.

No ado asure si wa.

Ase.

Divine messenger,

Divine Messenger of transformation,

Divine Messenger speak with power.

Man of the crossroads.

Dance to the drums.

Tickle the toe of the drum.

Move beyond strife.

Strife is contrary to the spirit of Heaven.

Unite the unsteady feet of weaning children.

The word of the Divine Messenger is always respected.

We shall use your sword to touch the earth.

Divine Messenger do not confuse me.

Divine Messenger do not confuse me.

Divine Messenger do not confuse me.

Let someone else be confused.

Turn my suffering around.

Give me the Blessing of the calabash.

Asé.

I've opened this project with an invocation to the Yoruba deity Esu Elegba, the spiritual manifestation of duality, choices, and new beginnings. At any crossroads or point of departure, Esu is acknowledged, for no journey begins without his blessing. As the divine interlocutor, the emissary between the spiritual and physical worlds, Esu is essential in helping us make meaning of our existence, our actions, and our purpose. Moved by the spate of police killings of unarmed Black men and the ensuing frenzy of media coverage, this project is situated within a crucial juncture and attempt to make meaning of and from a social, political, and cultural reality fraught with contradictions. What is more, the visual culture of death and destruction underscoring Black life is pervasive and normalized as a vital American narrative. Through this project, I set out to identify and understand how the threat of death maintains its fear-inducing chokehold on Black subjectivity, and how an understanding of death and the underlying meanings associated with it might ultimately be liberating. Yes, like Esu, the quintessential quandary, this project breaks and restores, hides and reveals, but ultimately grounds and releases while providing a new outlook and a new way of being.

This dissertation considers the powerful roles art and ritual play in our lives. It is first and foremost an experience, both visual and visceral. It challenges conventional form and the institutional reliance on the assumed empirical nature of traditional text-based scholarly research while operating as a model for a new paradigm for scholarly inquiry. As a *visual dissertation*, *Do or Die: Affect Ritual Resistance* disrupts common approaches to quantifiable scholarly research while embracing non-western and non-academic approaches to deconstructing visual art, ritual, and performance as language. Within this project, these unconventional forms act as textual components in a toolbox of resistance strategies. Its ultimate aim is to privilege and advance new forms of communication—language—for existence in a society that continues to perpetuate intensely de-humanizing acts of violence against Black bodies. The visual form of this project is central to its function. As a centuries-long campaign of images of violence and death have worked to coerce compliance and control over Black bodies, I believe that visual art can be equally effective in undoing this trauma. Through this dissertation I am not merely offering to counter negative images with positve ones, nor am I simply positing a theoretical framework to ground my study. Instead, I provide a catalog of *visual texts* that move toward phenomenological experiences, which dramatically interject new vocabularies while delivering deeper, more nuanced levels of communication, understanding, and healing.

The form through which my research is presented embraces alternative approaches to exploring Black subjectivity thereby inviting new levels of readership and a new means of viewership. By privileging the visual, I can open the project up to a much broader audience. *Do or Die* addresses a significant and pervasive social issue, that of violence and death projected onto and directed towards Black bodies. In the last few decades, a significant number of scholars both Black and white, have taken on this subject. Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, as well as Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me,* all come to mind. My interest in fields such as race and gender studies, affect theory, African spirituality, art history, and African

American studies has shaped my understanding and execution of an interdisciplinary approach to research. Taking into account my personal experience with the West African spiritual system of Ifa, my work has been informed by varying stratifications of inquiry. Conversant with the writings of Patricia Hill Collins, Karla Holloway, and bell hooks, I begin by utilizing a feminist standpoint methodology which is reflected in both my academic work and creative practice (evidenced in the series of visual *oriki*).[1] There are numerous academic concepts on the subject of Black death that have been documented, theories proposed, and solutions proffered, but much of this work is inaccessible to the public and especially to the communities most intimately impacted. Often the very language through which these ideas are presented becomes obstructive and divisive. Here again, I propose to break with convention in an attempt to maximize the impact and effectiveness of the work. Though I employ traditional methodologies in researching, information gathering, and critically analyzing scholarship from various disciplines and fields of study, I actively seek to engage a more diverse audience or readership that may or may not be familiar with the preexisting academic work on this subject. The project which is realized as a traveling exhibition of original artworks incorporates academic, visual, social, and cultural languages equally to invite broader access by moving beyond the academy—both literally and conceptually.

My research extends from several provocative questions around ways Black communities might resist the pervasive threat of death and ultimately into how the Black body might be redeemed and restored. Through my research, I've sought out potential new strategies for practices of resistance by asking several questions: In what ways could I, through my work, combat the spectacle of Black death? How can we, as a society, inspire Black livelihood and existence when the threat of death is so pervasive? How did communities of Black people address death before the influence of white supremacist violence? Through what mechanisms could we resist the ongoing psychological violence and despair inspired by the threat of death and, at the same time, usher in hope?

1 I will define and discuss the series of visual *oriki* in detail in a later chapter.

Before going further, I should address my usage of a capital "B" when describing Black people. Integral to my argument about empowering Black subjectivity is my choice to capitalize *Black* in opposition to conventional definitions and usage of language. This is a conscious decision informed by my attempts to distinguish *Blackness* as a category of identification. The idea of a Black identity is not fixed to a particular geopolitical border, but instead works to identify the broadly-dispersed race of African Diasporic peoples who share the common experience of racial oppression and subjugation.

Additionally, I take up a position with Yoruba culture and spiritual cosmology (*Ifa*) as a site of memory for Black people. Despite the fact that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade brought together indigenous Africans from numerous tribes and ethnic groups, many scholars cite Yoruba culture and religion as a major influence on social practices throughout Central and West Africa. A number of works including John S. Mbiti's *Introduction to African Religion*, Chidi Isizoh's *African Traditional Religions*, and Geoffrey Parrinder's *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, among others, acknowledge the vibrant history of the Yoruba which extends far beyond recorded history. Robert Farris Thompson asserts that:

> The Yoruba are one of the most urban of the traditional civilizations of black Africa. Yoruba urbanism is ancient, dating to the Middle Ages, when their holy city, Ile-Ife, where the Yoruba believe the world began, was flourishing with an artistic force that later provoked the astonishment of the West. At a time, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, when nothing of comparable quality was being produced in Europe, the master sculptors of Ile-Ife were shaping splendid art..."[2]

Thompson suggests that the Yoruba concept of *asé*, "the power to make things happen, [is a] key to futurity and self-realization."[3] The concept of asé is significant in understanding how and why Yoruba ideology has been sustained across time, continents, and cultures. In her foreword to

2 Robert Farris. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 3-4.
3 Ibid., XV

Philip Neimark's *The Way of The Orisa*, Justine Cordwell argues that, "[Ifa's] ability to survive seems to lie in its flexibility and its adaptability to new circumstances. Most important however, Ifa provides a pragmatic and psychological cushion against the vicissitudes of life."[4] The fact of Ifa's survival across oceans and through myriad traumas is a testament to its power and relevance.

In post-Civil Rights America, resistance movements have been primarily localized in non-traditional areas such as the arts and entertainment industry versus traditional spaces like government offices, courtrooms, classrooms, and churches. As Black visual artists and hip-hop culture have become dynamic arbiters of popular culture, they are compelling agents for creating and maintaining critical social spaces. However, many popular-culture social movements such as Black Lives Matter run the risk of reifying systemic racist practices or further disenfranchising Black communities. Rather than upend hegemonic systems that continue to marginalize and oppress Black bodies, these movements in many ways help sustain and validate those very systems. In fact, some argue that contemporary resistance practices fail as they often border on the idyllic, referencing sanitized versions of earlier resistance movements like the politically-based Abolitionist movement and faith-based Civil Rights movement. These modern strategies fail to comprehend (or naively ignore) wider, more nuanced complexities and challenges which emerged in earlier social justice movements or which impact contemporary society. Richard Iton argues that "Resistance on one front in isolation rarely represents a significant departure from or challenge to the dominant modes of being and production… Transformative politics… require that romantic—and limited—notions of resistance be dispensed with and that the problematic aspects of the dominant order not be reproduced under a faux radical banner".[5] In other words, the often didactic approach employed in conventional protest strategies do the opposite of their intended aim. Simple reactionary methods can be and are anticipated by the dominant system,

4 Philip John Neimark, *The Way of the Orisa: Empowering Your Life through the Ancient African Religion of Ifa* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), X.ß

5 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102.

and therefore are susceptible to manipulation, disruption, or, worse still, de-emphasizing.[6]

Though I consider art to be a powerful tool through which we might execute more effective forms of resistance, it is not without its issues. Journalist Jennifer Baker agrees that a significant challenge to confronting the spectacle of Black death is the lack of nuance found in social justice movements as well as within representations of Black life. In an article titled "Art Must Engage with Black Vitality, Not Just Black Pain," she observes the overwhelming evidence of Black pain and trauma that is found in the public record, including various resources like libraries, archives, and even the Internet. "While the violence isn't new," she writes, "the medium has evolved. It's available on a loop, on screens of varying sizes, in texts of all kinds."[7] The viral spread of Black trauma helps create the illusion that the threat of death is more ominous and imminent than ever before. From the news media to entertainment to the arts, nowhere is safe from images of Black pain and suffering.

Similar critiques about fetishizing Black trauma in art have been made by art critic, Taylor Renee Aldridge. In her essay "Black Bodies, White Cubes," she argues that Black suffering has gone mainstream. She suggests that the popularity of new political and social movements that center on issues impacting the Black community has become an attractive subject for contemporary artists and by extension the art market. As a result, in recent years, there have been a number of exhibitions that feature this type work, and that has also resulted in a spike in sales. Aldridge expresses concern that "artists have made systemic racism sexy; galleries have made it desirable to collectors."[8] As artists are often on the front lines of resistance movements and activism, through their respective mediums, they wield an ability

6 The recent flag-kneeling protest comes to mind. What began as an attempt to draw attention to police killings of Black males by NFL athletes has been reduced to an argument about disrespecting the flag or the contributions of the country's military.

7 Baker, Jennifer. "Art Must Engage with Black Vitality, Not Just Black Pain." *Electric Literature*. September 21, 2017. Accessed April 03, 2018. https://electricliterature.com/art-must-engage-with-black-vitality-not-just-black-pain-d39b-7cd690c1.

8 Aldridge, Taylor Renee. "Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem with Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race." *ARTnews*. July 11, 2016. Accessed August 03, 2016. http://www.artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/.

to tap into and influence the social and cultural temperature of society. This form of artistic propaganda can be treacherous, however, when it fails to offer critically engaging ideas and instead merely functions as a surface-level confrontation. But the affective impact of art and popular culture is most effective when it "thrives on, and indeed demands, nuance, dadaesque ambiguity, and contrapuntality as it resists fixedness in its moves between the grounded and the fantastic,"[9] asserts Richard Iton. It is precisely the willingness of art and artists to disturb, to subvert prevailing logics, and expose and complicate various intersecting meanings and experiences that I find to be a productive and complex strategy within multiple forms of resistance.

As a legacy of images and media depicting Black bodies in close proximity to social oppression, violence, and myriad traumas has resulted in a Black identity that remains fragmented physically, psychically, and spiritually, my work considers the potential impact of art and culture to provide alternative modes of communication. In presenting a visual dissertation, I propose to enter into a dialogue with my audience through portals other than doors. By emphasizing the phenomenological, the texts in *Do or Die:Affect, Ritual, Resistance*[10] privilege unconventional scholarly forms of communication towards new ways of understanding. The result is a project that is multidisciplinary, multilingual, and multifaceted. *Do or Die* engages with notions of the Black body, mind, and spirit represented respectively through methodologies that consider hip hop culture, the Black aesthetic movement formally known as Négritude, and concepts embedded in the Yoruba spiritual cosmology also known as Ifa. In the chapters that follow, I address how the visual works are utilized to animate these ideas, concepts, and theories. Most importantly, I provide some context for viewing the work by including, identifying, and unpacking various symbols, themes, and iconography. However, I will not attempt to explain

9 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

10 Conventional formatting rules require quotation marks for dissertation titles. This dissertation also takes the form of an exhibition of original art; I have therefore chosen to italicize the title for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion between the dissertation art and the dissertation text. Additionally, subsequent references to the title of the exhibition may appear shortened as: *Do or Die*.

the work which I fear would disempower the very essence and aim of the project. Rather than function as captions or didactics, this document provides additional context by demonstrating my research and methods. The objective of this supporting document is to enhance the legibility of the work, after all, the work doesn't require text so much as it is the text.

Do or Die is comprised of 5 bodies of original artwork consisting of performance art, painting, drawing, film/photography, and music. Each body of work is referred to and treated as a chapter in this dissertation. Within each chapter I maintain that each piece operates on multiple levels of cognition, providing multiple entries and exit points which cannot be accomplished by conventional means alone. Hip hop, Négritude, and Ifa spirituality combine in this project representing aspects of not only the body, mind, and spirit, but also past, present, and future. The result is a re-articulation of Black life and death. Through these means, my goal is to present the conceptual Black body completely restored by diminishing the threat of death against it. No longer coerced to act against itself or in a diminished capacity, the Black body becomes redeemed.

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

Part 1: *The Body*

"Most ~~young~~ kings get thier [sic] head cut off" - Jean Michel Basquiat. *Charles the First* (1982).

One of the most well-known myths of ancient Egypt recounts the death of Osiris at the hands of his brother Set. To further diminish and humiliate Osiris, Set dismembers his corpse and scatters his body parts throughout the Nile valley. In an act of devotion and love, Osiris' widow Isis commits to seeking out the disembodied parts of her love wherever they lie. For years she searches and ultimately reclaims each piece. With the help of the deity Thoth, she re-members Osiris's body and becomes impregnated giving birth to the god-king, Horus.

This story is significant throughout the corpus of African philosophy and particularly as it relates to the African diaspora. The various traumas visited upon African ideologies—cultural, social, physical, and spiritual— have manifested in a great dismemberment of the Black body. When I use the term body, I'm not referring simply to the physical body but rather the *body* as a collection or system of knowledge and ideas, a *conceptual* body. By working through and ultimately combining themes of the physical Black body, the intellectual Black body, and the spiritual Black body, I am attempting, as did Isis, to re-member (and ultimately re-animate) the Black body as whole and complete.

As evidenced in the work of African philosophers such as M.K. Asante and Ngūgī Wa Thiong'o, the notion of dismemberment and re-membering is a significant framework for contextualizing the modern experiences and challenges of African-descended people. Kenyan scholar Ngūgī wa Thiong'o describes the experience of Western intervention into Black subjectivity as a violent and multi-layered dismembering. "Dismembered from the land, from labor, from power, and from memory, the result is destruction of the base from which people launch themselves into the world".[11] The violent contact between Africa and the Western world via slavery, colonialism, and subsequently globalism has resulted in and continues to inform the loss of memory, language, history, culture, and religion—*identity*—for people of African descent. The violent disfiguring of the conceptual Black body has been sustained across centuries and across continents. This violence is manifest in multiple ways and is used to sustain a racial and social hierarchy.

The threat of death—both physical and social—against Black bodies has long worked as a coercive device. In *Slavery and Social Death* Orlando Patterson argues that violence and social alienation were central to breaking the will of and maintaining control over enslaved persons.[12] This threat remains so pervasive that it has become a kind of spectacle: a spectacle of Black death.[13] I describe the phenomenon as spectacle because the notion of Black death is inextricably tied to its recording and documentation through various forms of visual media. The idea of Black bodies as expendable is folded into the very fabric of American culture. Kassidy Jones asserts that "Black death was the first American pastime".[14] From public-flogging and executions of enslaved Blacks to the lynching postcards that circulated in the early 20th century to the recent media images of slain teen Michael Brown's body lying in the street for hours, images

11 Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 28.

12 Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard Univ. Press, 1982.

13 A "spectacle of Black Death" since it is not just the idea of death, but largely the representation of it in visual media that amplifies its effect.

14 Kassidy Jones, "Why Is America so Obsessed with Black Death? - The Tempest,", accessed April 3, 2018, https://www.bing.com/cr?IG=13DE5682CC1749BCA8ACF2B877D8D694&CID=3D9E09EBB1026205278D022DB0AD639D&rd=1&h=43x0p52bkgHwP08R9Z05ORKrNBYtfnUzrHP1xZOYvdQ&v=1&r=https://thetempest.

of Black bodies as dead or dying are seared into public and private imaginations.

Black men's bodies are disproportionately targeted within this spectacle. In a recent article published by Tommy J. Curry, he argues that:

> Historically, Black males have been imagined as savage and animalistic in the minds of Europeans and American settlers. Despite the verifiable cruelty of American chattel slavery, it was a common belief that only the shackles surrounding the neck, wrists and feet of African men prevented them from slaughtering the white man, raping the white woman, and destroying the whole of civilization".[15]

In an earlier essay titled "You Can't Stand the Nigger I see!: Kanye West's Analysis of Anti-Black Death," Curry argues that Black males are killed as a "deterrent against future revolts against white knowledge".[16] The systemic destruction of Black male bodies maintains a tradition that both dehumanizes and destabilizes the Black conceptual body.

The fetishization of the dead or dying Black male body is endemic to America. Representations of Black death serve as click-bait, driving ad revenues and content for 24-hour news networks as well as social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. During the 1990s and early 2000s these images permeated the entertainment industry through popular music and a new wave of Blaxploitation films that centered on Black violence. In the decades prior, a campaign of skewed policies that included a so-called "War on Drugs," income inequality, housing discrimination, broken-window policing, urban blight and much more complotted the social death of Black men and women. Like Black male bodies, Black women's bodies have also come to represent violent extremes. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders asserts that, "Black women have historically been represented as hypersexual, ignorant, and violent female "Negro beasts," in addition to many other denigrating types including the long-suffering desexualized Mammy,

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co/2015/12/02/social-justice/race/why-is-america-so-obsessed-with-black-death/&p=DevEx,5070.1.

15 Tommy J. Curry, "Column: Why Does America Have an Appetite for the Death of Black Men?" PBS, August 10, 2017, , accessed October 18, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/column-america-appetite-death-black-men.

16 Julius Bailey, ed., *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 128-129.

the primitive Topsy, the exotic Jezebel, and the evil, emasculating Sapphire."[17] Viewed as insatiable, violent, over-sexed, lazy monsters and welfare queens, Black people were made to be the face of the country's social ills. For most of the 20th century, Jim Crow laws and segregation, the destruction of independent Black towns and economic centers, high-profile assassinations of Civil Rights leaders, and general disenfranchisement of people of color extended from the violence, brutality, and dehumanizing conditions of the 400 years of slavery before that. When we close our eyes, we still hear Black death emanating from the lyrics of popular music or the all too familiar cadence of news anchors: *today an unarmed Black man was killed by police*.

This spectacle of Black death is so culturally ubiquitous that it has now become synonymous with the Black experience. Whereas absence largely defines Black representation in the media in previous decades, images of Black bodies in trauma generate the highest ratings today. Even when it is not directly tied to racialized violence, Black death within and amongst the Black community is viewed as natural and predictable. This violence too, this Black-on-Black[18] violence, can be directly tied to the desperation and despotism resulting from centuries of Black oppression. Ta-Nehisi Coates asserts that it is "not pathology" but instead "the intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear."[19] The violence experienced by Black people often passed down from parent to child, subsequently distorted and perverted, are attempts at self-preservation gone awry.

Nihilism and self-destruction—particularly among Black males—can also be viewed as a result of years of racist policies. Evidence of this psychological trauma is pathologized and used to justify further aggressions towards their bodies. Rather than address the inequities and disparities in hiring practices, education, substance abuse, and mental health, high profile public

17 Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2006), 3.

18 The term "Black-on-Black violence" represents another layer of violence as it is only used to describe proximity crime within Black communities. Though proximity crime amongst other communities is statistically similar, such occurrences are not racialized, (i.e. "white-on-white violence", "Asian-on-Asian violence", etc.).

19 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 17.

figures and politicians call for young Black males to be "brought to heel."[20] The result is more aggressive policing, racial profiling, and ultimately violence, often resulting in death. Although a recent study by the *Washington Post*[21] revealed that unarmed Black men are nearly 3 times less likely to be shot by police, the popular narrative remains that Black men are more often the victims of police shootings. Meanwhile, some pundits and commentators argue that so-called Black-on-Black crime is a more pressing social issue. According to former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the tension between law enforcement and Black people can be eased if and when Black people are more deferential to police.[22] He contends that unchecked communities of crime-prone Black youth are a more likely threat to the lives of other Black Americans and police alike. But whereas Black men make up 6% of the entire population they account for 40% of the total of unarmed citizens shot and killed by police in 2015. A breakdown of the FBI's Annual Crime statistics from 2001 to 2015 reveals that though intra-racial homicide numbers are high amongst Black people, they actually slightly lower than homicide numbers amongst white people.[23]

Despite these facts, media invest in a particular narrative that centers on images of Black male death and violence. For example, between January 2015 and July 2016, police officers shot and killed 175 Black men between the ages of 18 and 29. During that same period, 172 white men in the same age range were shot and killed by police.[24] Of those, nearly all 24 of the cases of officer-involved shootings of unarmed Black men have made national headlines, while the stories of the 18 unarmed white men are rarely known. Given this discrepancy, coupled with

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20 "Mrs. Clinton Campaign Speech, Jan 25 1996 | Video," C-SPAN.org, , accessed July 21, 2016, https://www.c-span.org/video/?69606-1/mrs-clinton-campaign-speech.

21 Tom Jackman, "This Study Found Race Matters in Police Shootings, but the Results May Surprise You," *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2016, , accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/true-crime/wp/2016/04/27/this-study-found-race-matters-in-police-shootings-but-the-results-may-surprise-you/.

22 Emily Schultheis, "Giuliani: Blacks Must Say "what They're Doing among Themselves about the Crime Problem"," *CBS News*, July 10, 2016, , accessed March 4, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/giuliani-blacks-crime-problem-dallas-police-rap-music-chicago/.

23 "Race and Homicide in America, by the Numbers," *U.S. News & World Report*, , accessed February 18, 2018, https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-09-29/race-and-homicide-in-america-by-the-numbers.

24 "2015 Washington Post Database of Police Shootings." *The Washington Post*. Accessed February 18, 2018. http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings.

feverish coverage of the ensuing protests and civil unrest, the killing of Black people by police contributes to a long-standing tradition in representations of Blackness – perpetuating Black death as a spectacle. American popular media is and always has been inundated with images of Black pain, suffering, trauma, and death.

This spectacle of Black death is a form of terrorism. By constantly and consistently presenting Black men's bodies as dead or dying, Black boys begin to shape and define their experience as such. In *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, Karla Holloway writes, "Black culture's stories of death and dying were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experienced, perceived, and represented African America. Sometimes it was a subtext, but even then, the ghostly presence of those narratives reminded us that something about America was, for Black folk, disjointed".[25] The spectacle of Black Death remains a visceral inevitability, instilling both panic and despair.

Performative and transgressive, hip hop culture represents the corporeal and somatic aspects of my research and practice. Writing about the need to form new pedagogical and analytical frames through which to engage Black youth in his article "The Fire This Time: Black Youth and the Spectacle of Post-Racial Violence," Henry Giroux argues that the ongoing discrepancies and oppressions of racism and poverty have failed to threaten or coerce compliance amongst Black youth and instead "produced new modes of politics for young people of color".[26] One of the most consistently transformative vehicles for this type of politics is found in hip hop culture. Hip Hop and particularly rap music's function as source of cultural criticism is as old as the art form itself. Likewise, a growing number of visual artists, having grown up surrounded by rap music's obstinacy to prevailing social behaviors, have used their respective mediums to similar effect. As a result, my references to hip hop are not exclusive to rap music and

25 Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

26 Henry A. Giroux, "Henry A. Giroux | The Fire This Time: Black Youth and the Spectacle of Postracial Violence," *Truthout,* , accessed July 24, 2016, http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/30907-the-fire-this-time-black-youth-and-the-spectacle-of-postracial-violence.

performance but includes the visual arts and fashion as well.

Citing James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Tricia Rose argues that public and hidden transcripts are blatantly evident in rap music and hip hop culture.[27] Hip hop is an exercise in inversions of power where artists "tell alternative stories of contact with police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript," she writes. Hip-hop artists routinely portray the so-called villains and bad guys and act as anti-heroes exposing the fallacy of public social scripts. This undoing creates an active tension which disrupts accepted and normalized performances of identity. As a result, hip-hop is a powerful tool through which we might confront the spectacle of Black death.

Through its various sonic and visual forms hip hop transports our gaze into spaces that are either unheard of, undesirable, or that have been traditionally rendered un-seeable. Krista Thompson suggests that, contemporary African-Diasporic art practices are not strictly about rendering oneself visible but rather about inviting new types of viewership. In effect, these practices are not simply about being seen but about subverting the act of being seen, what is being seen, and how that seeing can ultimately be transformative—for the subject as well as the viewer. The deployment of light as popularized in hip-hop performance as well as an aesthetic device used in many contemporary African Diasporic art practices is itself a unique resistance modality and works to disrupt the white gaze.[28] Thompson refers to the practice of bling as a postmodern methodology and behavior where spaces and bodies historically rendered in- or un-visible resist their erasure.[29] She writes that light "might be interpreted as a protective means. We might understand the use of material goods and production of blinding light as a shield or

27 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 110.

28 The "gaze" ('white gaze"/ "white normative gaze") is a philosophical term that refers to the Eurocentric tendency to categorize and classify bodies and objects vis-à-vis a Eurocentric perspective. The gaze is a racialized construct that over-determines non-white bodies.

29 Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 40.

apotropaic, simultaneously reflecting and deflecting the deidealizing gaze on black subjects."[30] Hip hop's ability to both capture and deflect attention marks it as a powerful space from which to begin to reorient notions of seeing and being. Additionally, the hypervisibility of hip-hop provides a compelling and dynamic stage for articulations of the Black body which are both hidden and in plain view.

In *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Post Modernity*, Gen Doy argues that postmodern practices of performance, installation art, and video open up space for Black artists to explore the myriad social, political, and economic factors that contribute to the formation of their Black identity. Embedded in these articulations of identity are notions of visibility, rebellion, and resistance. Extending from her point, the experience of these same artistic practices by Black audiences creates a space for Black people to both see and imagine themselves anew.

Do or Die employs hip hop in its myriad forms as an exercise in postmodern expression and rebellion. The hip-hop body is a persistent site of rebellion and transgression. It operates as a conscious disruption that is simultaneously known and unknowable. In other words, the *body* becomes an interchangeable sign or metaphor that may refer to the physical body (embodiment) or to the body as a collection of knowledge, ideas, language, and systems. It is within the latter notion of the indeterminate, dynamic, and multiplying body that I find the engagement with hip hop most provocative. One of the challenges to our typical way of thinking about the body is the desire to identify various experiences within what are often rigid rules of possibility. As such, abstract readings of experience and expression, sensations (intensity)— are not easily resolved or categorized. Hip hop has and continues to subvert the limitations of expression, movement, politics, creativity, and even scholarship which have traditionally worked to disenfranchise the Black body. Inherent to hip hop is its dominance over contemporary representations of Blackness, the Black body politic, and the significance of hip hop culture with respect to Black male physical bodies.

30 Ibid., 33

Notions of the hip hop body and the body as hip hop are deployed throughout *Do or Die* in a number of ways. Beginning with the *New World Egúngún* (Fig.1) signs of the hip hop body are evident in the very construction of the mask. The use of identifiable elements of hip hop dress contemporize the masquerade[31] and locates it within a hip hop vernacular. For example, the hoodie—which also evokes the memory of Trayvon Martin[32]—sweat pants, and Nike sneakers (Fig. 2-3) are popular fashions worn by many young Black males. The cowrie shell head covering seen throughout the images also evoke transgressive hip hop performance. In 2013 during his acclaimed *Yeezus* tour, hip hop artist Kanye West wore a series of Maison Martin Margiela crystal full-face head masks during a large portion of his live shows. The masks which were featured in the haute couture brand's 2012 collection became an instant media obsession and a classic hip hop icon due to West's own legendary status. The masks donned by West in his shows lend themselves to the theatrical nature of the production as well as providing a "vivid, readable visual"[33] given the challenges of actually seeing the performer in large concert venues. The show's protagonist is on a self-imposed journey, seeking understanding from something much greater than himself. After a direct engagement with a Christ-like figure, the mask is removed, revealing the artist reborn. Inspired by West, I created a cowrie shell, full-face head mask (Fig. 4) as a means of both masquerade and a commentary on indigenous systems of cultural value and meaning. Within Ifa cosmology, cowrie shells maintain significant sacred and spiritual implications. According to Babatunde Lawal, cowrie shells were once used as a form of currency and retain a prominent role in traditional as well as contemporary art practices amongst the Yoruba.[34] He also suggests that "cowrie shells reinforce daily prayers to one's inner head (*ori inu*), invoking the three cardinal blessings: wealth, children, and longevity."[35] By combining elements of hip hop fashion and Ifa ritual, the works begin to

31 I will go into more detail about the masquerade in a later chapter.

32 16-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012 by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman, who assumed the teen to be a criminal because he was wearing a hooded sweatshirt.

33 Jonathan Ringen, "11 Reasons Kanye West's 'Yeezus' Tour Is Actually Incredible," *Rolling Stone*, November 22, 2013, , accessed February 28, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/11-reasons-kanye-wests-yeezus-tour-is-actually-incredible-20131122.

34 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 22.

35 Ibid., 22

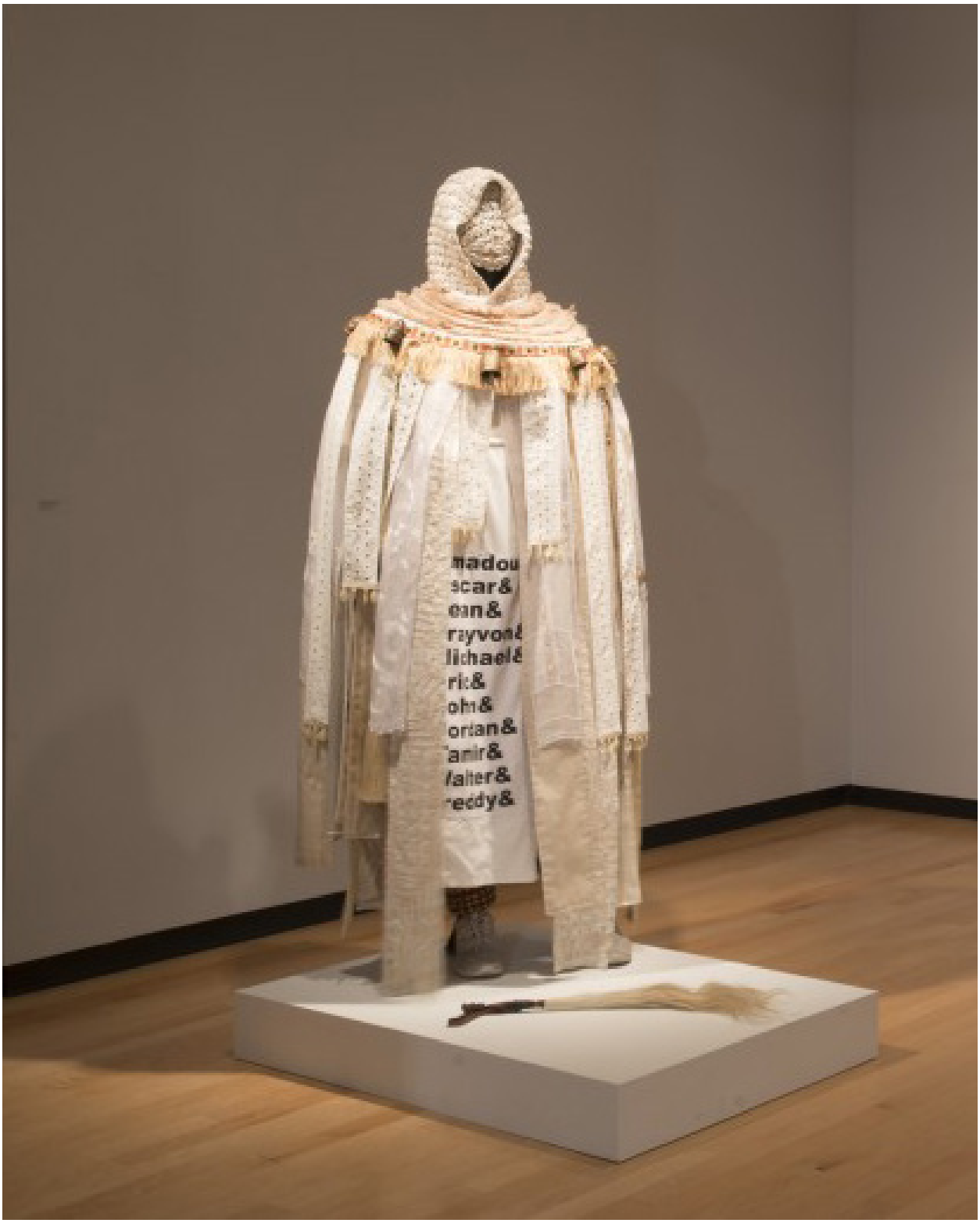


Fig. 1
New World Egungun
(Installation view, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art).



Fig. 2
New World Egungun Detail
(Source photo, courtesy of Fahamu Pecou).



Fig. 3
New World Egungun Detail
(Installation view, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art).



Fig. 4
New World Egungun Detail
(Installation view, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art).

open up new channels of seeing and reading.

The body is also engaged in the creation of the Egún Dance drawings (Fig. 5). In this collection, dance and drawing become powerful expressions of faith and transmutability. The Egún Dance drawings exhibit of the power of performance as ritualized spectacle. This is articulated through a series of large format gestural drawings. The performance of Egúngún is a powerful and transformative act. Curator and art historian Amanda Hellman writes that "As the performer begins to move, he is transformed, incarnating the spirit through dance"[36]. Egúngún is not a static object. The true power of the Egúngún emerges in its ability give form to the formless by enacting movements that defy the physical and accentuate the intangible. Babatunde Lawal asserts that the "Egúngún mask usually performs to dramatize the Yoruba belief in life after death."[37] The performance involves a variety of acrobatic skills, turns, and movements that highlight the intricacies of the costume itself. This spectacle is considered to dazzle with both aesthetic and spiritual implications (Fig. 6). Dance and movement figure largely in Ifa rituals. The experience of movement, and subsequently, transfiguration (being possessed or "mounted") require submission of the body to the process of the dance. This spirit possession relinquishes the body from its perceived limitations transforming the subject from a physical to a spiritual being. Another way to think about this form of submission is *ebo*. Ebo is the act of spiritual sacrifice. Through the act and art of bodily surrender, devotees display their commitment to their practice.

In his essay "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," Thomas Defrantz argues that in hip hop, Black social dance similarly opens up a space of liminality, between being and becoming. As exhibited in the acrobatics of the Egúngún, hip hop dance contains "dual transcripts of 'public' and 'private' meaning,"[38] explains DeFrantz. Dynamic, fluctuating, and improvisational, hip hop dance renders the performer with both physical and

36 Fahamu Pecou et al., *Visible Man: Fahamu Pecou*, ed. Mark Sloan (Charleston, SC: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016), 151.
37 Babatunde Lawal, *Visions of Africa: Yoruba* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 61.
38 André Lepecki, *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).



Fig. 5
Installation view.
Egúngún drawings.



Fig. 6
Traditional Egúngún in performance.
Photographed by Olaniyi R. Akindiya Akirash

subversive power. “The black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary. In social dance, the black body achieves a freedom from traditional American strictures defining legitimate corporeality. The dancing black body, responding to and provoking the drumbeat, acts performatively against the common American law of black abjection. ‘Speaking well’ in terms of black social dance defies—temporarily—systematized oppression”[39] In this way, hip hop dance isn’t merely about entertainment, but it also deliberately acts as a methodology of resistance. Hip hop dance does not merely illustrate the music; it articulates it as well. Its dual function as entertainment and agitation continues a legacy of Black artistic expression on the interrelationship between visual, physical, and verbal metaphors.

The drawings in this chapter recreate the sense of physicality and movement expressed in Egúngún performance as well as hip-hop dance. Through the medium of drawing the performativity involved in their making is recorded, expressed, and experienced in the mark-making. Quick, deliberate, and expressive movements convey the kinetic nature of the subject in the works. The twisting of the body and shuffling of the feet can be seen as much as they are felt. The process of creating the drawings echo the movements it attempts to capture and requires a sense of urgency, that like dancing, is at times deliberate and other times improvised. These drawings are not illustrations of dance; they are the dance. Further accentuating the images, washes of burnt umber echo red earth or perhaps blood. Like any other element in Yoruba art, colors also contain and convey sacred principles. The red color family (pupua) is typically associated with power and life (blood). According to Lawal, red “in general refers to the vitality that the blood-stream generates in the body, in addition to the magical power of the reddish subsoil from a grave.”[40] The cascading washes frame and dissolve the graphite marks, making the figure appear and recede before your eyes. The wash is applied using an oral atomizer sprayer. After filling the receptacle with pigment, one blows into the straw and manually sprays

39 Ibid.
40 Babatunde Lawal, *Visions of Africa: Yoruba* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 27.

the pigment (Fig. 7). This action is also reminiscent of spraying objects and offerings with rum or gin in Ifa rituals. The wet pigment is later pushed and manipulated with wide brushes and broad, sweeping strokes. The drawings are presented, framed, and encased with cowrie shells, emphasizing again the sacred, spiritual, and ceremonial significance of the shells (Fig. 8-9).

Lastly, the body is invoked in the short film and original score *Emmett Still* (Fig. 10). *Emmett Still* is a response to the anxieties and nihilism experienced daily by young Black men. Constantly bombarded with images of their own demise at the hands of police and other self-imposed authorities, many young Black men begin to perform their identity out of desperation and fear, ultimately giving way to self-destructive behaviors and attitudes.

During the summer of my 18th birthday, I watched the film *Menace II Society*.[41] The film tells the story of the protagonist, a young man called Caine who gets caught up in the precarious game of Black life in South Central L.A. As a result of growing up around gangsters and drug dealers, from an early age Caine aspired to be like them. Like those around him, he develops a nihilistic approach to life. "Do you care if you live or die?" Caine's grandfather asks him. "I don't know", he replies. Love for his girlfriend and her young son eventually showed him that there was more to life than the things he had witnessed. He realized that he did in fact want to live and was offered a chance to have a fresh start in Atlanta. But before he could leave, he was gunned down in a drive-by shooting, his newfound hopes and dreams oozing from holes in his bullet-riddled body.

Menace II Society premiered amidst a slew of neo-Blaxploitation[42] films in the 1990s. For years before and after, films like *New Jack City*, *Boys N Da Hood*, *Juice*, *South Central*, *New Jersey Drive*, and others featured stories about mostly young, poor, urban Black men attempting to escape the trappings of social and economic despair and political disenfranchisement, often

41 *Menace II Society*, dir. Allen Hughes and Albert Hughes, by Allen Hughes and Albert Hughes, New Line Cinema, 1993.

42 Blackploitation emerged in the 1970s as a subgenre of exploitation films aimed at urban Black audiences. During the 1990s, there was a resurgence of films aimed at Black audiences which as in a previous generation exploited the traumas and skewed fantasies of Black urban life.



Fig. 7
Screenshot
Fahamu Pecou: Making II [Video file]



Fig. 8
Installation view, detail.



Fig. 9
Installation view, detail.



Fig. 10

Screenshot
Emmett Still [Video file]

unsuccessfully, and who, even if they survived, were deeply scarred. The common theme among them seemed to suggest that what the streets didn't take from you, the dominant system (layered with myriad disadvantages) would. These films illustrated the seemingly insurmountable odds of survival for Black men—a narrative I was already far too familiar with. For years I had been warned by teachers, news anchors, and "very special episodes" of my favorite television shows of my impending demise. Not realizing the impact that films like *Menace* and those portentous warnings had on me, I began to mark milestones in my life, not by my accomplishments, but by checking off the tragedies I had avoided:

19… Never been shot… 20… No children… 21… Never been arrested

In *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death*, Abdul JanMohammed defines the death-bound subject as "the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death".[43] Using death-bound subjectivity as a framework, JanMohammed unpacks aspects of death and dying as an animating force of the Black experience and expressions of culture. Being death-bound he asserts, Black expression and Black life is inherently linked with death. Or as Karla FC Holloway asserts in *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, "The anticipation of death and dying figured into the experiences of black folk so persistently, given how much more omnipresent death was for them than for other Americans, that lamentations and mortification both found their way into public and private representations".[44]

Compounding the death-bound subjectivity of Black people, Aimé J Ellis puts a contemporary spin on these themes when he introduces the concept of a death-bound imaginary. The death-bound imaginary is defined as being "made up of commonly accepted beliefs… about death-defiance, glory, and reckless disregard".[45] Ellis equates the death-bound imaginary to

43 Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wrights Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.
44 Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.
45 Aimé J. Ellis, *If We Must Die From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 11.

performances of Blackness and particularly Black masculinity that are rooted in displays of self-directed violence and peril. Though these tendencies border on being potentially suicidal, they are more often than not attempts to liberate one's self from the hegemonic and racist deployment of death as a means of terroristic coercion. The death-bound imaginary suggests that choosing death (social or actual) is the one expression of personal agency the death-bound subject possesses.

Emmett Still attempts to redirect death-bound subjectivity and the death-bound imaginary experienced by Black male youth by offering to "imagine the life you could live, if you weren't afraid to die." In this short film, the main character, "God", finds himself in a deadly encounter with a police officer. Ultimately an intervention from his ancestors and spiritual guides helps him reorient his thinking and move forward in life without fear. The film incorporates again a visual language of hip hop through young Black male and female actors who represent the millennial generation. It also incorporates hip hop language through its score of original hip hop music performed by me along with Grammy Award winning hip hop artist Killer Mike and Atlanta-based rappers Ekundayo, DFocis, and AllentheHuman. The score combines traditional hip hop practices of sampling to create original tracks. Though the sounds largely reference "trap" music, a contemporary southern hip hop aesthetic, the samples also include African chants, drums, and other percussive elements. The result is a hybrid, *African-trap* sound. Produced and scored by Brian Harrison (aka NerdPac) the title track features a snippet from James Baldwin's 1965 debate with William Buckley at Cambridge University. In the debate titled "Is the American Dream at the Expense of the Negro?" Baldwin cites the myriad disadvantages impacting Black communities, imploring, "If one has got to prove one's title to the land, isn't 400 years enough? 400 years and at least three wars… The American soil is full of the corpses of my ancestors… Why is my freedom or my citizenship or my right to live there (sic)… How does it conceal their question now?"

The film is significant in that it directly confronts prevailing narratives of Black death

through expressions of the redemptive qualities in Ifa as well as in hip hop and art.

Privileging the body through the creation of art works (visual and performative) that are conversant with hip hop aesthetics, attitude, and performativity, I provide a methodology that directly engages with a contemporary Black audience and young Black males specifically. These themes and ideas are further explored through poetry via the rap lyrics from the short film and accompanying album *Emmett Still*. The use of social language through hip hop fashion, culture, movement, and poetry to convey ideas found in my academic research provides unique points of entry and invites dialogue amongst those most intimately impacted by the specters of Black violence.

Chapter 1

Egún Dance Drawings



Egún Dance 1
60 x 40 in | Graphite and Acrylic on Paper



Egún Dance 2
60 x 40 in | Graphite and Acrylic on Paper



Egún Dance 3
60 x 40 in | Graphite and Acrylic on Paper



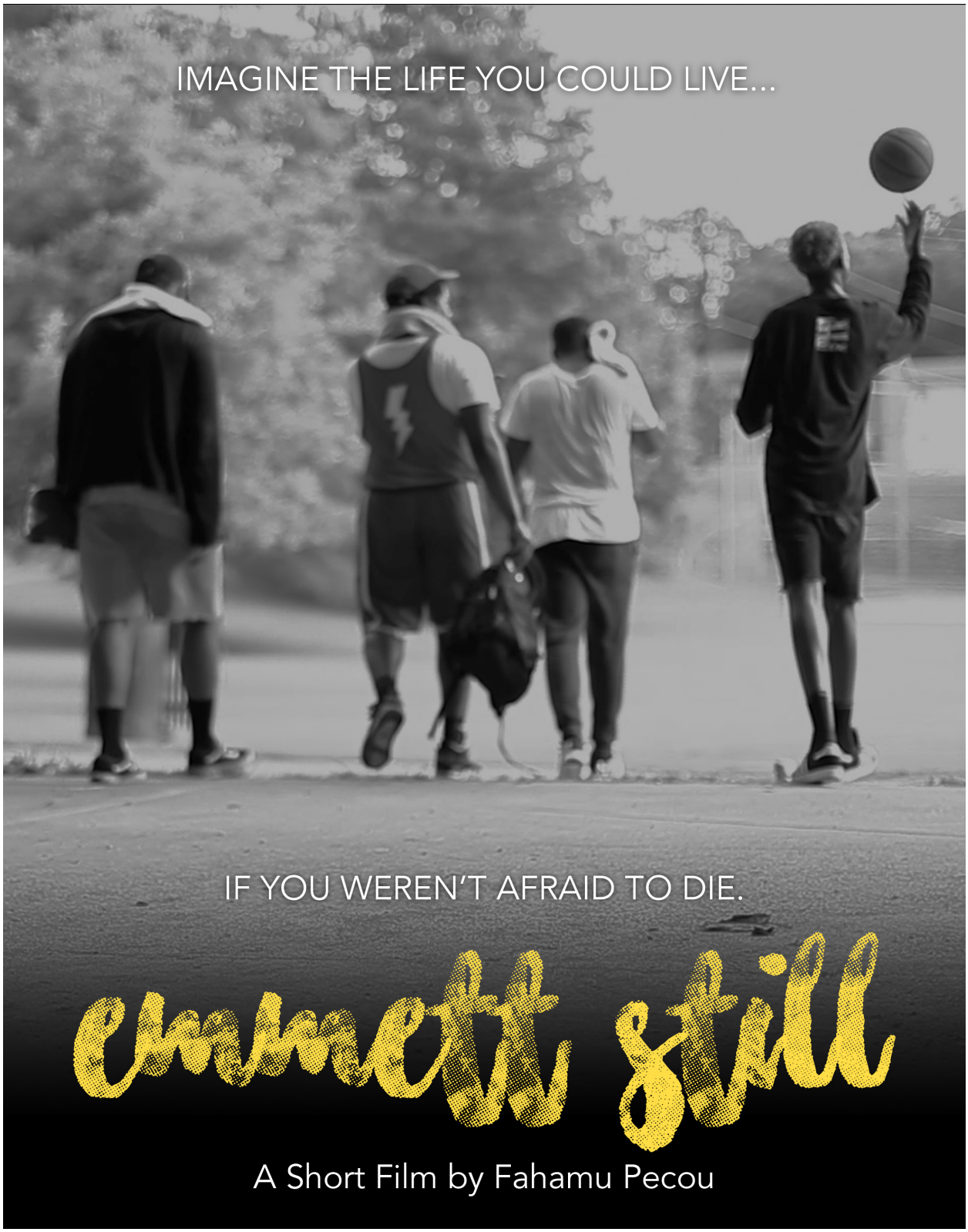
Egún Dance 4
60 x 40 in | Graphite and Acrylic on Paper



Egún Dance 5
60 x 40 in | Graphite and Acrylic on Paper

Chapter 2

Emmett Still (Short film)



Emmett Still: A Short Film by Fahamu Pecou
Graphic design by Fahamu Pecou.
Pecou F., Mason K.(Producers). (2016). *Emmett Still* [DVD].



Emmett Still: A Short Film by Fahamu Pecou
Pecou F., Mason K.(Producers). (2016).



Emmett Still Screenshot



Emmett Still Screenshot



Emmett Still Screenshot



Emmett Still Screenshot

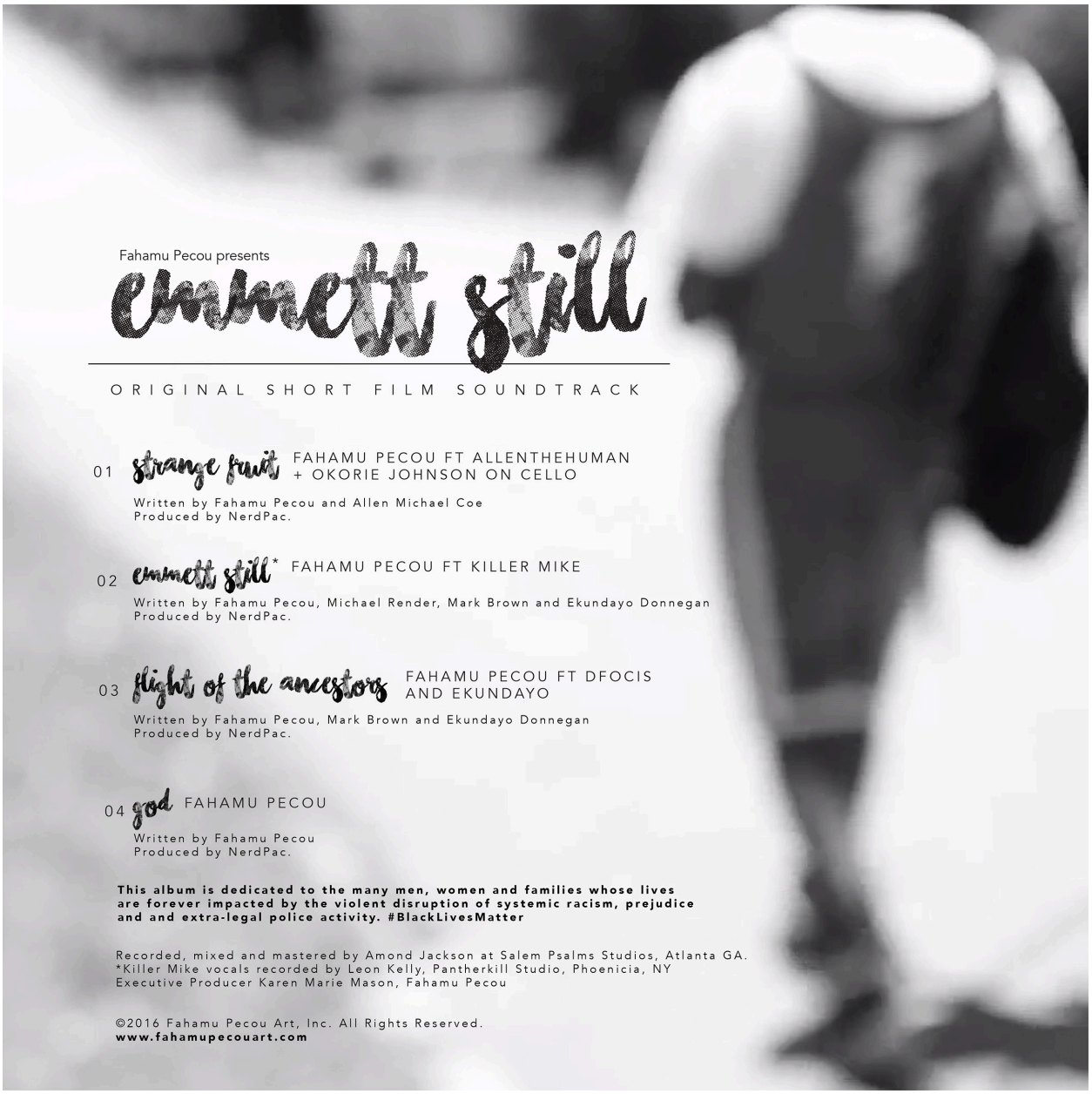
Chapter 3

Emmett Still (Album)



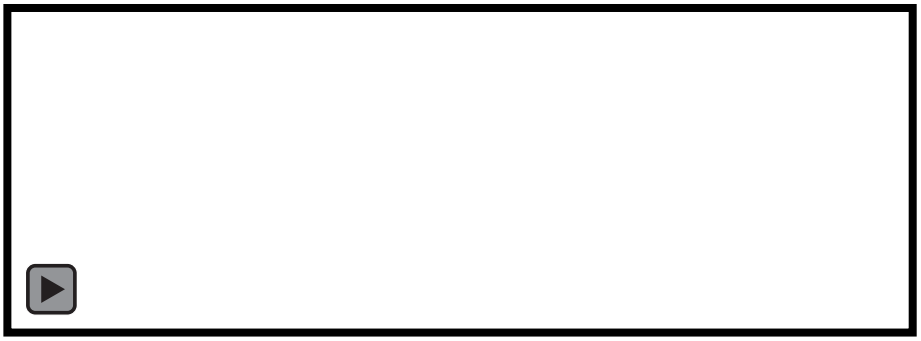
Emmett Still EP
(Front Cover). Graphic design by Fahamu Pecou.

Pecou, F., Mason K. (Producers). (2016). Emmett Still: Original Short Film Soundtrack [Compact Disc]



Emmett Still EP
(Back Cover). Graphic design by Fahamu Pecou.

Pecou, F., Mason K. (Producers). (2016). Emmett Still: Original Short Film Soundtrack [Compact Disc]



Strange Fruit

Performed by Fahamu Pecou and AllentheHuman featuring Okorie Johnson on cello
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP) and Allen Michael Coe

Verse 1

Strange fruit
Raining down in this garden of Eden
Eaten premature it's the love that we needin'
Flesh ripped apart it's like a struggle just bein'
A troubled skin just to be in
Oh God the struggle we be in
Drawing breath from certain death
It's never been easy
Between the world and me we need coats like Ta'Nehisi
The chill from the the winter's wind is quite breezy
It's a cold, cold world and oh, we stay freezin'
We stay frozen
At war like Greeks and Trojans
Temperatures rise
Feel the heat like an explosion
Silence in our pain
We cry with no emotion
Eyes swollen with tears we stay hoping
Back bent from the weight, we stay coping
Trying to breathe through the pain, we stay chokin'
A better day on the way, we stay hopin'
Oh yeah there's trauma and pain but we ain't broken

Verse 2

Uncle Kendrick said good job
Uncle Yeezus say good job
Uncle Sam said go get jobs
Or we get police to get cha
Like oh-my-god we still preaching to the fire
But who would Eva know we got Devils in the choir
Like oh-my-god we still preaching to the fire
But who would Eva know we got Devils in the choir
Negus
Like I'm alive my Negus
Like I survive my Negus
This ain't no jive my Negus
It's time to pay up the Pecous
Negus
My freedom papers signed by Obama, my mama, massa and Jesus
Negus
Chicken George lead me to Georgia
And Kunta brought me to Kansas
And Rosa let down the roses to
Sing alongside with my séance
To hide it from people was to put it in a book
So we booked it to Booker T when they throw the book at us
Don't judge a book by its cover but the story it gathers
But it's all in my native tongue so it's way out of context
Including my family name
Like America I'm through witcha
It's the true name my mama gave me
*Jong Gode *young gods**



EMMETT STILL

Performed by Fahamu Pecou and Killer Mike
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP), Michael Render (Aniyah's Music/ASCAP), Mark Brown (Mark Jr/ ASCAP), Ekundayo Donnegan (Nyame Dua Publishing/ASCAP)

Verse 1

Emmett Still
We still Emmett
Mother's cry over open caskets, they sons in it
My sons in it
Your sons in it
The way we move in the world, we constricted
The senseof pride in our hearts, the undid it
The threat of death on our backs, we run with it
The tragedy and the pain we one with it
But politicians try to convince us it's all unscripted.
A simple whistle, toy pistol, loose cigarette
And bet I'm still a nigga, yet,
Yeah I'm still a nigga
Yep!
No arrest and yes the stress is uncivil
Rock and hard place my home is in the middle
And I'm Emmett Still
Yeah I'm Emmett Still
Yeah I'm Emmett Still
Seasons change, sound deranged
And yet I'm Emmett Still
I will never break even though they try to break my will

Yeah I'm Emmett steel,
Yeah I'm Emmett steel.

Verse 2

Bourgeois nigga
Gutter nigga
You are still a Ne-ga-ro
You be walking
Hear the word
What you call me nigga fo'?
Your name could be Tamir
Or your name could be Obama
They don't like you
They don't like your father or your mama
You could be the President, a lawyer or Your Honor
And some stupid bitch on Fox TV will disrespect your honor
And I call a stupid bitch 'a stupid bitch'
That's what it is
How the fuck you justify the police killing kids?
I represent the people po-po never loved
A hundered years ago we was lynched we was drug
A hundred years later we still face-down in the mud
But I'ma tell you dirty ass devils one fact
You better get hip
(cause) we will shoot back
I got this AR with me even if I'm butt-naked
And I dare a government agent try to come take it
You see the only thing the devil fear is a shotty
I let freedom ring in every bullet in his body
Got'eem



Flight of the Ancestors

Performed by Fahamu Pecou, DFocis, Ekundayo
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP), Mark Brown (Mark Jr/ ASCAP), Ekundayo Donnegan
(Nyame Dua Publishing ASCAP)

Verse1

Oh you think that you can take what's ours'
Oh you think that you can claim our power
Seeding fear in us
Disappearing us
Cut us down
But you just make us tower
Across the waters we walk with gods
Get so high that we dodging stars
With these words we hallmark cards
Write new rules to even out these odds
When God dances
These our chances
My wit lit
My prayers spit
Yemanya be the the liquid
Keep my physical fit with
Herbs and prayer
Urban flair
Urban fear
Words and fear
Recognize that they been here
Call their names and they'll be right here

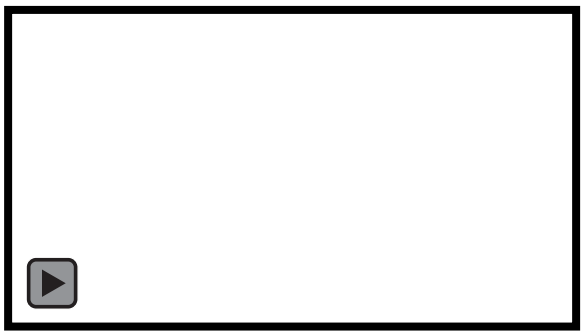
Verse 2

Live and you learn
Get it of D see D when you earn
I know my name and I ain't no slave
Try to hold my pay like I don't know rage
I dare ya
And I got questions you ain't got answers for
Miss me with the bunnies and the Santa Claus
Growing up transpo was the handlebars
I fell off, this me with the bandage off
I got pain on me
How it rain on me
And I got homies
Till it's 10 on 3
Then I'm on my own
Buy time in the sky till I own my drone
Pray my now
Make my nana proud
And her nana proud
And her nana proud
Black and I'm proud
YES I'm allowed
Will my fortune I can't buy a vowel
How Sway? How?!

Verse 3

I'm the… I'm the… I'm the… I'm the… I'm the… I'm the…
Omnipotent
Omnipresent
I'm the blessing
I'm progressing
My profession
This is a step in the direction is up
Next to us
Y'all next to nothing
Don't question my strut
Or question my quest
I rest at the crest
Family or death
Nothing less
It's more than your mental can process
More than a mental process
Holding your spirit for hostage
Break free
Here's a great key
Don't hate me

Love me or leave me
It wasn't as easy
As I made it look
Made to cook
Here's a reading to even your reasoning
Like words displayed in books
Typeset light kept right step
God in my blood like platelets
God is my blood let's face it
Different ways to the math
Many paths to the same sum
Salute my ancestors
Until I became one
On the shoulders of giants
I stand in defiance of those that ain't one with the one
I'm like African drums
Back in the slums
Changing the energy
Engaged with the enemy
Till my frame is a memory
A hum



GOD

Performed by Fahamu Pecou
Written by Fahamu Pecou (Fahamu Pecou/ASCAP)

Verse 1

Old gods
New names
New winners
Old games
Old pictures
New frames
New mental
Broke chains
New money
No change
Deep fire
Blow flames
Bold claims
Bent on my destruction
Kanye told you, I'ma show you
You can't tell me nothing
You can break my body
But can't claim my spirit
I grow exponential
And I know your fear it
And I know you feel it
In the air you feel it
You can try
But you can't kill it

Verse 2

I'm a divine light in the flesh
I'm a god manifest
My wife's a goddess, my seeds next
My life immortal no fear of death
Walk on water
No fear of death
Alive and well with deep breaths
The god in me is no secret
They raging up in Harlem
Molotovs in B'more
Shutting down Chicago
Won't be no marches like before
To be sure we writing
Teach the seeds and we fighting
Spark the flame we igniting
Just like Shango
And we lightnin'
RAHHHHH

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

Part 2: *The Mind*

"The states of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we are all prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge." – James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction.*

The Yoruba revere art for its ability to promote "social and spiritual well-being." [46] Traditions of art and art making are associated with divinity, particularly with the orisa Obàtálá who is said to have molded the first human forms from clay. This association of art practices with Obàtálá extends deeper with the understanding of the deity's significance with morals such as patience, memory, wisdom, and rectitude. Often associated with the elephant or depicted as an old, white-bearded man, Obàtálá is known to be wise and the pristine nature of his white cloth points to his meticulousness and purity. Molding and composing the basic forms, Obàtálá comes to represent outward displays of beauty.

Another orisa credited with creativity and artistic expression is Ogún. Ogún is often revered for his thoroughness in warfare, but more generally he represents the spiritual implications of tools—be they tools for building and farming or tools of war. Ogún embodies the spirit of technology and mastery. The expression Ògúnlànà refers to the deity's role in

46 Babatunde Lawal, *Visions of Africa: Yoruba* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 7.

forging the path that laid the foundation for human civilization on Earth. In all things, Ogún represents efficacy and competence; to master one's craft is to court Ogún. Ogún is said to refine and embellish the basic human forms composed by Obàtálá by adding fine details and defining characteristics and embellishments. In this way, Ogún comes to signify inner beauty.

The Yoruba consider the inherent aesthetics in art as either manifestations of outer (worldly) beauty and inner (spiritual) beauty. As outer beauty is believed to be conceived at the unpredictable whim of Obàtálá, inner beauty is regarded as an expression of character and thus controllable. According to scholar Babatunde Lawal, concepts of beauty have deep spiritual significance and, as a result, body adornment as expressions of internal beauty as well as artistic mastery and pride in outward displays art and craftsmanship are considered to be divinely inspired. Lawal writes that "the capacity to create as well as appreciate art is an integral part of humanity, accounting for the aesthetic impulse in poetry, music, dress, pottery, sculpture, architecture and other forms of material culture." [47] But it is important to note that this is not art for the sake of art.

> To the Yoruba, the ideal work of art should combine good craftsmanship (external beauty) with utility (internal beauty). In other words, it is not enough for a carved stool to look artistic, it must be strong and comfortable to sit on—just as good character (internal beauty) reinforces the physical appeal (external beauty) of an individual.[48]

In balancing inner and external beauty, one achieves wholeness. Mirroring the balance and wholeness as expressed in the Supreme Being, Oludumare, humanity must master those aspects of outer and inner beauty, worldly and the sacred, form and function as essential expressions of the divine. This sentiment is echoed in an essay by Eisa Nefertari Ulen for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* where she suggests the functional nature of art of the African Diaspora: "[I]n African ontology, art is also utilitarian; it does something. The

47 Ibid., 14.

48 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 18.

drum communicates, a garment signifies status, a facial mark reinforces interdependence in community, a dance initiates one's own womanhood. In African ontology, art works. Art acts."[49] An artwork may be attractive, but if it doesn't do anything, its value is diminished. Conversely a pot that is misshapen may yet hold water but being unattractive it is unlikely to be used. Historic and contemporary Black art practices are also largely invested in this logic. In his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," W.E.B. Dubois declared that "all art is propaganda" and argued that artists must use their platform to ever be a tool in promoting the beauty of the Black race.

It is through an engagement with and understanding of the dual principles and nature of Black art that I introduce to this project aspects of the *mind*. Specifically, I look through the lens of the Black philosophical and creative movement known as Négritude. Négritude allows me to engage the ways in which art, culture, language, philosophy, and resistance all intersect. It has both aesthetic appeal and functional utility. In *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Bill Ashcroft asserts that Négritude, a literary and philosophical aesthetic movement of Black pride and culture created by Afro-French colonists in the 1930s, reversed the binary of white domination, not as a means of establishing an essentialist Black identification but as a subversive act of political rebellion. He writes, "negritude is the sign, not of an essence, but of a reality coming into being, the sign of a declaration of agency."[50] Negritude sought to reframe the prevailing colonial narrative around Blackness by privileging Black art, thought, and creativity. The writings and art inspired by this movement illuminated Black potential. Not art for art sake, these were tools for the construction of a new Black identity. Ògúnlànà.

Through both creative and critical writing, Négritude inspired a paradigm shift throughout the African diaspora and helped move Black subjectivity out of the darkness of colonial subjugation. Embracing the color of their skin—which had been marked undesirable

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49 Ulen, Eisa Nefertari, "The Space between: Afro-Surreal Liminality in Khary Lazarre-White's Passage". Nov 18, 2017 https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-space-in-between-afro-surreal-liminality-in-khary-lazarre-whites-passage/

50 Len Platt and Sara Upstone, *Postmodern Literature and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24.

by Western standards— Césaire and Senghor employed imagination and fantasy to explore the depths of their Blackness. Confronting what Homi K. Bhaba calls the "regime of truth"[51] in colonial discourse, Négritude broke with ideas of Blackness that were readily visible and knowable.[52] V.Y. Mudimbe argues that, "The colonized internalizes the imposed racial stereotypes, particularly in attitudes towards technology, culture, and language. Black personality and Négritude appear as the only means of negating this thesis…Négritude becomes the intellectual and emotional sign of opposition to the ideology of white superiority. At the same time, it asserts an authenticity which eventually expresses itself as radical negation."[53] The power in the Négritude movement was the space between the words. Using the art of poetry to transfigure Blackness, writers like Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Léon Damas tapped into the Black subconscious and jumpstarted a dormant spirit. It was this performance of a thoughtful and critically engaged Black thinker that inspired other men and women of African descent to see themselves and think about themselves differently and to challenge their status as colonized beings and rise to the occasion of their Black selves. Négritude poetry and its theories inspired African nations to rise up and seek their independence from their European colonizers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes the impact of Négritude as one of a series of African-centered philosophical and political movements that were "cultural and intellectual manifestations of the quest for wholeness."[54] Négritude centers on language and the re-imagining of language to more ameliorative means. Using "metaphor and symbolism" as strategies of resistance, Négritude was complex and complicated. In *Return to my Native Land*, Césaire writes:

> my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
> it plunges into the red flesh of the soil
> it plunges into the blaxing flesh of the sky
> my negritude riddles with holes

51 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture: Critical Theory and the Postcolonial Perspective* (1991), 96.
52 Ibid., 101.
53 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 93.
54 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 39.

the dense affliction of its worthy patience

The imagery is surreal yet at the same time profound. Césaire insists that his Blackness isn't a construct; it cannot be torn down. Instead, it spans both earth and sky. His Blackness, worn and battered, is the very essence of being, patient and unmoved. The language and structure of poetry provides a lucid image for the reader, while at the same time creating a connectivity beyond what is written. The founders of the movement often differed in their ideologies, approaches and their challenges, but ultimately their ideas facilitated growth and expansion on what could be possible for the Black body politic. Négritude was not simply a confrontation, but rather a movement towards a conceptual shift in ways of seeing and being.

Similar to Césaire and Senghor, I am interested in a politics of resistance that is not simply predicated on reactions to external forces but rather redirects personal agency by shifting or reframing the narrative. When compared to other social, cultural, and political movements such as Garveyism, Dubois' Pan-Africanism and The Harlem Renaissance, as well as more modern movements such as the anti-apartheid struggle, the American Civil Rights struggle, and Black Power movements. Through a deep engagement with literature, language, and memory as well as an understanding of the impact of white supremacy, Négritude scholars were rigorous in their attempts to mine Black thought in an effort to exhume their Africanness. Though largely imagined, this notion of an African identity, unfettered by whiteness, was a major theme. Thiong'o writes, "Writers and the intellectuals in these movements are aware that without a reconnection with African memory, there is no wholeness. Not surprisingly, the theme of ancestor and past is the most pronounced in Négritude poetry."[55] While radical, Négritude was imagined out of the minds of individuals educated within the colonial system. Despite being transgressive, they still held onto ideas, values, and claims informed by Europeanness.

In *Do or Die* I proceed similarly yet with a major distinction. My goal is to mine African memory in an effort to rescue Black masculinity from the pervasive apathy and nihilism

55 Ibid., 39.

inspired by the spectacle of Black death while resisting the limited logic of binary opposition as commonly practiced in modern resistance movements. In other words, it is not enough to simply show more positive images of Black life if the general attitude is one of despair. Instead, I believe it to be more productive to empower agency by changing the language through which the Black body has come to think of itself. As a result, these works explicitly engage in the philosophy of Yoruba cosmology and as a result, operate free of the confines of conventional European ideals. These expressions do not reference an imagined sense of Africanness, but rather an ancient and enduring cultural memory. The text is felt, experienced, and seen (images, film, music, performances, etc.). It is also largely informed by ritual and evidences a significant site of remembrance. As a result, the works have utility and purpose. As experienced in Négritude poetry, the imagery employs metaphor and symbolism to offer a more dynamic and nuanced vocabulary to its readers. The texts here are more theoretical than practical.

In *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Brian Massumi proposes a move away from the "discursive body" by challenging its conflation with always-readied preexisting codes and significations. Similarly, in *Touching, Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick argues that epistemological fixations within conventional academic frameworks actually work to restrict our ability to read new and potentially radical theories of affect. She argues that emotional experience and physical reality do not always align in ways that produce easy categorization and, further, that reducing an experience to the limits of conventional language places more value on one over the other.

Language, linguistics, framing, and other organizing structures have attempted to bring order to how we understand and navigate our world. However, for all they accomplish, they also stifle and limit other possibilities—especially when the language is not your own. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, people of African descent throughout the diaspora suffer from linguicide or linguifam, both symptoms of their dis-memberment. Linguicide is "the linguistic equivalent

of genocide."[56] Defined as the violent effect of having one's native language effectively eradicated, enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were forbidden to speak their native languages and forced to learn the language of their oppressors. Family and tribal units were broken apart, further rupturing any attempts to retain a sense of culture or identity. Linguifam (linguistic famine) is the result of deliberate "linguistic deprivation" on the African continent. "In the African continent, African languages—deprived of the food, water, light, and oxygen of thought, and of the constant conceptualizing that facilitates forging of the new and renewal of the old—underwent slow starvation."[57] It is my contention that despite being written primarily in French, and through the use of metaphor and symbolism, the ideas advanced in Négritude poetry transcended language and subverted the effects of linguicide and linguifam. Concepts of Black pride, beauty, intellect, and culture seem to operate on simultaneous registers, moving beyond the literal word and into the realm of sentiment. It was not so much what was said as what was felt or experienced through the art work.

Sedgwick argues that it is in the slippages between words and objects, emotions and concepts, that we might locate and reveal newer and potentially deeper understandings of our world. She suggests that "the line between words and things or between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena is endlessly changing, permeable, and entirely unsusceptible to any definitive articulation."[58] It is this space of the intangible and inarticulable modes of expression that this chapter attempts to engage. Invested with a deep consideration of the space between linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of communication, I use the medium of painting to depict a visual *oriki* or Yoruba sacred praise poem.

The most recognized examples of paintings of the sacred poetry of Ifa (oriki) is largely credited to Austrian-born artist and anthropologist Susanne Wenger. Wenger spent years living

56 Ibid., 17.
57 Ibid., 19.
58 Eve Kosofsky. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

amongst the Yoruba, learning the various myths and tales of Yoruba folklore and rendering them through paintings, drawings, and screen prints. Her numerous works depict various adventures of the orisa and their interactions with each other as well as humankind. These narratives, which were largely passed down through oral tradition, were made new through this fresh visual expression. Employing different icons, symbols, and visual metaphors, Wenger was able to translate these complex narratives into a visual language that is as appealing as it is functional.

Borrowing from Wenger, the paintings-as-texts in *Do or Die* convey a type of oriki which tells the story of a spirit in transition. This oriki is composed using various ideas and expressions of the spiritual realm, divine femininity, and reincarnation. The lone male figure represents the spirit of a young Black man whose life was ended too soon. Undefeated, he appeals to Àjé (divine feminine energy) to restore him. As he is yet formless, the cowrie mask that covers his entire head renders him anonymous. He awaits and seeks the permission of Àjé to take a new form and to be restored and returned amongst the living (Fig. 11-12).

Like many non-Abrahamic religious belief systems, the Yoruba believe that death is not the end but instead a stepping-off point. The Yoruba maintain a practice of honoring and venerating the ancestors as they believe that one may be reincarnated or return as *Egúngún* to assist in the lives of the living. In *Visions of Africa*, Lawal maintains that "it is customary among the Yoruba to regard a child born shortly after the death of a parent or grandparent as a reincarnation of the soul of the deceased."[59] The idea that death is not finite is a powerful concept when considering the implications of the threat of death. *We can end you*.

The imagery and role of sacred feminine energy is paramount to this chapter as it affirms life and rehabilitation of the Black male body as it also signifies and restores the Black female body to a position of power and functionality. Similar to Isis restoring the body of Osiris, the female womb is significant in Yoruba cosmology as a source of life and re-membering. Àwon

59 Babatunde Lawal, *Visions of Africa: Yoruba* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 12.

Ìyá Wa (our mothers) symbolizes the divine, spiritual power of a woman's life-giving force (Àjé) and is depicted throughout this chapter as a pregnant woman. In *The Architects of Existence: Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*, Teresa Washington writes; "Our mothers do not plot to destroy, devour, or maim us. Were it not for them, we would not exist. Human life is dependent on the wombs and choices of our mother, and this simple fact forms the foundation of the eternal bond between the African mother and child."[60] The fact of mother's love and life-sustaining ability does not diminish the male, but rather, it substantiates him. Àwon Ìyá Wa symbolizes balance and wholeness. Her presence provides comfort and assurance. This fact helps elucidate a nefarious aspect within the spectacle of Black death which presents Black women as living martyrs rather than as thriving mothers. I've made a conscious choice to focus on Black women in motherhood as a direct response to the spectacle of the dead Black male body. The image of the life-giving and life-sustaining power in Black womanhood provides equanimity and balance in contrast to pervasive images of Black death. My work on Black motherhood is informed by an understanding of the divine feminine archetype in Ifa as well as by feminist scholars such Patricia Hill-Collins, Kimberly Wallace Sanders, bell hooks and others.

Often the images of murdered Black males are coupled with or followed by images of grieving Black mothers, wives, and daughters. These images of Black women pleading with white men to provide them with justice or rendered solemn and infertile by grief at the loss of their loved ones reinforces the idea that the system of racist violence is definitive. *We can end you*, it insists. Images of a distraught Mamie Till, a stoic and perpetually grieving Coretta Scott King, Sybrina Fulton's[61] exasperated pleas for justice, or a distressed Diamond Reynolds[62] handcuffed next to her dying boyfriend being consoled by her four-year-old daughter all come to mind. Despite the heroism of the many Black widows, childless mothers, and fatherless daughters, the spectacle of the death in their wombs is glaring and equally terroristic. This not to

60 Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence:* Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature (United States: Oyas Tornado, 2015), 13.

61 Sybrina Fulton is the mother of slain teenager Trayvon Martin.

62 Diamond Reynolds live streamed the altercation with an Minneapolis police officer who killed her boyfriend Philando Castile in the presence of Reynolds' daughter.



Fig. 11
Do or Die Installation



Fig. 12
Do or Die Installation

say that Black women are not themselves directly the victims of racialized violence and death; however, Black male bodies remain disproportionately impacted by this spectacle. By proximity, Black women's bodies are also diminished and threatened as they are rendered powerless to protect their sons or be protected by their husbands and partners. The symbolically broken bodies of Black women help to twist and distort Black potential by denying its very source. By imaging Àjé in this bold and powerful way, this visual oriki also works to re-member the Black female body by depicting Black womanhood in positions of power and privileging their role in the continuation and restoration of life (Fig.13)

Scale and materiality contribute to the visual impact of these texts. Averaging eight feet in height and in some instances width, the imagery is designed to be arresting. The larger-than-life format suggests an otherworldliness to the figures portrayed in the work. Light refracting off of the rich brown tones of skin create a lushness and beauty that contradict the de-idealizing view of Black bodies as they have traditionally been rendered in the spectacle of Black death. These Black bodies are vibrant and alive; they draw you in and demand your attention and respect. Similarly, the use of gold leaf on the body of the central female figure accentuates her pregnant belly (Fig. 14). The broken patterns in the application of the gold leaf bring to mind shifting continents or land masses. After all, the Yoruba understand the cosmos to be a big calabash divided into two halves. "The top half of the gourd signifies maleness as well as the sky or heavens…The bottom half represents femaleness and the primeval waters out of which the physical world was later created."[63] The shape of the expanded womb recalls the calabash. Another icon of fertility and nurturing that reflects the womb is the cast iron cauldron or pot (*odu*). In rituals where men are initiated into priesthood, they are provided with a symbolic womb (odu) through which to wield the life-giving force of Àjé. This idea of the womb as a vessel or symbol of life is also reiterated by Washington, who asserts that "the womb is a cosmos/the cosmos is a womb."[64]

63 Babatunde Lawal, *Visions of Africa: Yoruba* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2012), 12.

64 Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence:* Àjẹ́ in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature (United States: Oyas Tornado, 2015), 1.



Fig. 13
Do or Die Installation



Fig. 14
God (detail)

Other traditions commonly affiliated with women are also made evident in the treatment of the painting surfaces. Subtly rendered by applying a contrasting clear gloss to the background surface's matte finish are a variety of patterns known as *adire*. Adire is a system of "story-telling and communication through fabrics,"[65] according to Allyson Aina Davies. The tradition goes back centuries and involve symbols and patterns created through a variety of resist-dyeing techniques. The background of each painting features adire patterns signifying spiritual protection and defense as well as crossroads. Each painting is embedded with various icons and symbols related to Ifa cosmology. The painting series conveys the cyclical concepts of birth/death/afterlife/rebirth as conceived and understood within Ifa.

Visual elements that point to the hip hop body are also evident. The male figure wears patterned shorts, sweats, and Nike sneakers, drawing a connection to and locating hip hop culture within the broader African spiritual conception. His *ileke* (sacred beads) hang low against his shirtless frame recalling rappers and their gold chains. The ileke symbolize both protection and prosperity. Each strand of colorful glass beads represents the guardianship of a specific orisa while the beads themselves, traditionally coral beads dug from the sea, are believed to attract blessings from the elusive ocean-dwelling deity Olokun[66] (Fig. 15).

Equally significant within this chapter is that which is not easily read or identifiable, the *space between the words*. Liminality represents a crucial element in Ifa ritual as well as artistic expression. The ability to be of and beyond this world is often expressed through modes of spirit possession and transfiguration. In Ifa rituals, benevolent spirits are invited to interact with the living through practices like Egúngún. Lawal suggests that even in Yoruba artistic practices trances are common. "Given the association of creativity with the sublime, art-making in Africa often involves much more than manipulating tools to give form to an idea. It is also a ritual process, reenacting the archetypal act of divine creation, linking the physical to

65 Davies, Allyson. *Storytelling Through Adire: An Introduction to Adire Making and Pattern Meanings*. 2014

66 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 23.



Fig. 15
The Return (detail)

the metaphysical and the human to the divine."[67] Similarly, many contemporary artists, myself included, describe feelings of disembodiment and disconnection when creating works of art. There is often a space in time where one ceases to make deliberate strokes and succumbs to something higher. A period when one cannot consciously connect the dots between where he began and where he ended. This idea of liminality is echoed in the painting series. Though there is a narrative that can be gleaned across the collection of paintings, the story is neither linear nor explicit. The paintings do not have a specific order. They can operate as a collection or as individual pieces. Like the liminal space that one enters into between the conscious making of the work and the final outcome, readers subconsciously fill in the blanks through their experience with the work. Provoking the senses through scale, color, texture, and form, these texts excite the viewer and invite a reading that will be different from one viewer to the next. The works privilege individual interpretation of what is and isn't there.

A prominent figure that emerges in any reference to Yoruba cosmology is the deity Esu Elegba. Esu is portrayed as the essential quandary. He is the trickster and the master communicator, the guardian of the crossroads. One of Esu's major functions points to the use of language or text, not to describe or define but as a space of interpretation. Through interpretation, meaning becomes malleable, expansive, and dynamic. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, argues that in the context of Yoruba ideology the text is not fixed, but rather consists of "truth on one hand and understanding on the other."[68] As such it can be argued that Esu becomes both a literal and figurative representation of the space between "intent and meaning."[69]

Do or Die understands that the power wielded by the spectacle of violence and death is in large part due to the affective nature of sensation disseminated through visual mediums. These violent images function to convey a sense of dread and doom that has long shaped the way

67 Ibid., 15
68 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 28.
69 Ibid. (47)

Black men have considered their bodies and their potential. Though these images do not call out individuals by names as if to say *you're next*, the subtext, *you can get it too*, is always implied. In an attempt to overcome the impact of linguicide and other forms of dismemberment, Do *or Die* employs visual texts that eschew colonial and neocolonial remnants of power and authority. Like the Négritude scholars, the texts in *DO or DIE* represent an attempt to excavate forgotten aspects of our cultural, social, and spiritual selves—to make the Black body whole. They invoke a paradigmatic shift in logic through subversion, operating in and on the liminal space between the seen and unseen, the material and the sacred. Though there are visible and hidden[70] elements of traditional textual modalities —including both written and spoken word—the paintings trigger sensory and other nonverbal language.

Working to remake the Black body and mind whole, the paintings in this chapter strike a balance between the Black male and Black female body as well as between Black death and Black birth. Àjé refers to the divine feminine energy, but it also signifies wholeness. To support this claim, I point to the numerous depictions of spiritual beings in Ifa cosmology which often presented with both male and female organs. These depictions suggest wholeness as everything in nature has dual qualities.

> The importance of being whole is everywhere evident in Yoruba life and iconography. And it is crucial to understand that the recurring and resonant recollections of women-exclusive towns and the stunning images of bearded sword-bearing mothers and of ruling fathers who strut about in voluminous skirts elaborately coiffed hair crowned with ikóóde of Àjé are not examples of tranvestism, homosexuality, androgyny, cross-dressing, queering, bisexuality, hermaphroditism, or any other Western construct or compartmentalization of gender. They are exhibitions of the manifest wholism of Àjé.[71]

In other words, the Yoruba understand the importance of duality as a means of representing

70 Some paintings feature para-texts. Inscribed on the back of the works are prayers and invocations not visible to the viewer.

71 Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence:* Àjẹ́ in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature (United States: Oyas Tornado, 2015), 30.

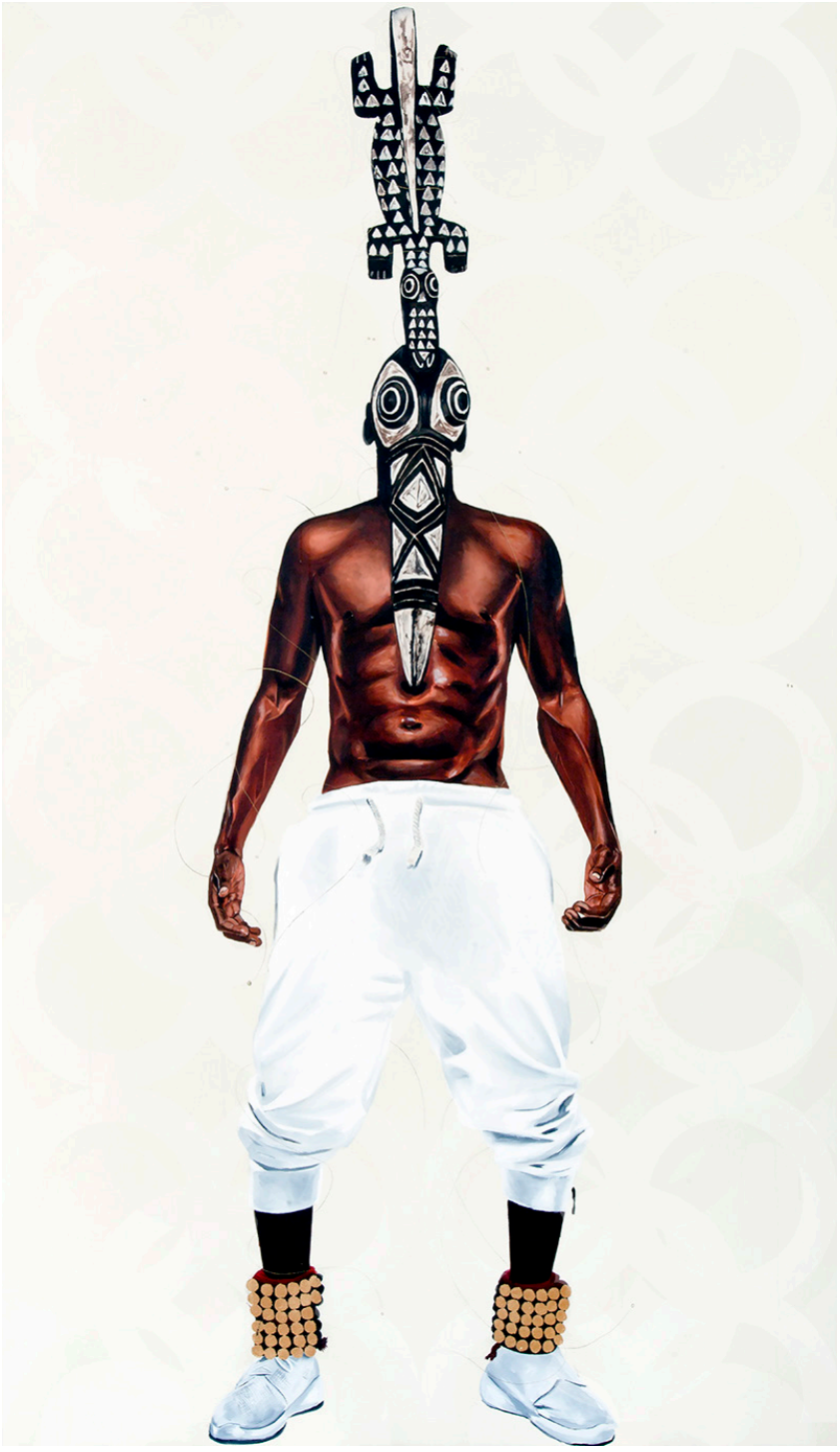
balance; inner and outer beauty, form and function, life and death. Philip Neimark argues that, "In Ifa, it is understood that, as with logic and intuition, the rational and nonrational, linear and nonlinear were given to us to use and to use together. To Ifa, the singular excesses of materialism are as unintelligent as the singular excesses of spirituality. To use only one half of your capacity—either half—is to play at life with half a deck."[72]

Fire burns but it also lights up the darkness. Water may drown you but without it you will die from thirst. Neither aspect of these elements could exist without the other, just as there is no death without life. Through visual texts that re-member the Black mind, both the conscious and unconscious, *Do or Die* cuts a path through the jungle of images of broken Black bodies, laying the way for new concepts of Black life and existence. *Ògúnlànà.*

72 Philip John. Neimark, *The Way of the Orisa: Empowering Your Life through the Ancient African Religion of Ifa* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 5.

Chapter 4

Visual Oriki



Old Gods, New Names
84x48 in
Acrylic and Gold leaf on canvas



The Way
96x66 in
Acrylic and Gold leaf on canvas



Something Eternal
96x66 in
Acrylic and Gold leaf on canvas



Something Eternal
78x96 in
Acrylic and Gold leaf on canvas



Rising
84x48 in
Acrylic and Gold leaf on canvas



The Return
96x96 in
Acrylic on canvas

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

Part 3: *The Spirit*

"As I face Africa I ask myself: what is it between us that constitutes a tie which I can feel better than I can explain?" – W.E.B. Dubois, *Dusk of Dawn.*

In 2015, blogger Nanea Hoffman wrote on her Facebook page, "None of us are getting out of here alive, so please stop treating yourself as an afterthought." The quip quickly went viral, underscoring an undeniable fact of life; we all, every one of us, at some point, will die. But for some of us, death comes much quicker, much more diabolically than for others. Karla Holloway writes, "Instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of [Black] daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience in the culture's iconography and included it as an aspect of Black cultural sensibility[73]." A visceral and impending fear of death contributes to a deep anxiety that animates Black performance and expression. This threat, inherent to the spectacle of death is enduring and pervasive, its roots reaching back to the earliest

73 Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

days of slavery in the Americas and colonization on the African continent.

Subsequent centuries of racialized terror, violence, and disenfranchisement have helped to maintain this sense of dread. Even today, despite the threat of death being (arguably) somewhat less ominous or overt compared to preceding decades, the violence it inspires continues to impact generations of Black bodies. In his critically acclaimed work, *Between the World and Me*, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates describes a generational fear which continues to underscore the performance of Black masculinity. Writing to his 15-year-old son about the recent spate of police killings of unarmed Black men he asserts "I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid."[74] This fear of imminent death is a direct result of white supremacy and white supremacist ideals. In order to uphold positions of power, white patriarchal authority insists on its ability to kill or otherwise silence Black bodies.

For nearly 400 years, Black Americans have lived with a fear of this authority. Black men have been particularly impacted by the physical displays of this threat. The fear of death gets passed down, father to son, ultimately manifesting in enmity and disdain for one's own body, his only crime, the Blackness of his skin. Instantly marking the Black male body as a threat to white hegemony, it is inescapable. Frantz Fanon recounts the sensation of waking up to this imposition in *Black Skin, White Masks*. "I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the 'idea' others have of me, but to my appearance."[75] Similarly, from an early age, many Black males begin to see themselves in terms of the predetermined assertions about their Black body and the perils that seemingly come along with it. In the images that play out in popular media, in the pages of history, and in the very world around him, he begins to recognize society's obsession with and commitment to his destruction. With no recourse or abdication, the very idea of death's dominion over his life becomes skewed and perverted. He doesn't live as much as haunt his

74 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 14.
75 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 95.

own existence. And death at times seems like a welcome respite from a life of despair. Like the character Caine in *Menace II Society*, he ceases to care whether he lives or dies.

In an effort to circumvent the legacy of white supremacy's hold on Black bodies, I began to seek out theories and expressions of traditional African ideologies and language specifically around concepts of death and dying. As Hoffman eloquently asserts, we will all eventually perish, but the proximity to death and Black bodies is unsettling. Karla Holloway describes this sensation another way:

> "Black culture's stories of death and dying were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experienced, perceived, and represented African America. Sometimes it was a subtext, but even then, the ghostly presence of those narratives reminded us that something about America was, for Black folk, disjointed."[76]

I wanted to examine the phenomenon beyond the context with which I have become much too familiar. In order to do this, I first needed to understand why death as it pertained to Black bodies seemed so imminent and also why information that could provide a healthier engagement with this undeniable fact of life seemed so foreign in the first place.

Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o describes the campaign of colonialism in Africa as an exercise in "conquest and domination… practices of power intended to pacify."[77] Through numerous acts of violent and brutal disruption, European colonizers upended centuries-old customs, traditions, and practices by waging war on the Black body, mind, and spirit. As if the people who inhabited the land were never there, European colonizers imposed their will and authority, displacing social and cultural groups of people and desecrating sacred lands and practices of living. This campaign of violence included destroying any trace of indigenous identity and cultural memory. One of the vilest acts was to criminalize and abolish traditional

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76 Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

77 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 4.

languages. Subjugating the native populations, they forced them to adopt the tongue of their conquerors. African languages, "deprived of the food, water, light, and oxygen of thought"[78] underwent what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o calls linguifam (linguistic famine).

This violence was not exclusive to the African continent. Those Africans physically ripped from their motherland were subjected to exponentially greater horrors. In addition to the complete loss of language (linguicide), their bodies were also exposed to unimaginable forms of physical and psychological violence through a brutal and dehumanizing chattel slavery system followed by decades of extralegal justice in the form of lynching, high profile assassinations, disproportionate incarceration rates, and other sociopolitical oppressions. After all of that, Black Americans continue to struggle with aggressive forms of psychological, economic, educational, and social disenfranchisement. The physical terrorism directed towards the Black community is disproportionately targeted towards Black men's bodies. The result is disconcerting, perpetually disrupting the advancement of Black men in American society—a type of arrested and divested development.

At the core of this white supremacist campaign is a contradictory system of values that titillate and crush. Duped into believing that power, is equated with masculinity, Black males who are systemically denied power embrace patriarchal ideas and strategies in an effort to assert agency over their lives. But patriarchal masculinity is at the root of white supremacy. Scholars such as bell hooks suggest that traditionally, displays of male dominance did not exist amongst African cultures. hooks asserts that patriarchal masculinity is a learned behavior amongst Black males:

> They had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power. The gender politics of slavery and white-supremacist domination of free Black men was the school where Black men from different African tribes, with different languages and

78 Ibid., (19)

value systems, learned in the 'new world,' patriarchal masculinity.[79]

As illustrated by concepts found in Yoruba culture, male and female power was divided equally, echoing in all things the sacred wholeness of duality.

As yet another example of the brutal and figurative dismemberment of the Black body, white supremacy grooms Black males to equate manhood with power and dominance. The imposition of this logic is both contradictory and confounding. Even as Black men assume roles of power or authority, they are consistently reduced by the ongoing threat and spectacle of Black death. As Fanon argues, "All they ask of the Black man is to be a good nigger; the rest will follow on its own. Making him speak pidgin is tying him to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a visible appearance for which he is not responsible… The fact is that the European has set an idea of the Black man."[80] This idea is fixed, determined, and no alternatives will be accepted.

Moreover, Fanon expands his analysis by identifying qualities inherent to racism and white supremacy as alienating the Black man. Similar to Thiong'o concept of dismemberment, he suggests that European (white) culture detaches the Black man from himself, creating within him feelings of inferiority. Black men are deliberately alienated from the world, existing only as victims of racial exploitation and contempt. It is not enough to simply neutralize the Black male, but white supremacist logic insists that it be *seen* doing it. The spectacle of Black death is necessary to uphold systems of dominance, authority, and power. Misguided attempts by Black males to adopt those same systems and patriarchal values become further alienating and ultimately self-destructive. Rather than being viewed as exercises or expressions of power, the tactics used to establish patriarchal masculinity when performed by a Black man are used to justify or substantiate further violence towards him. In 1967, former head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, initiated a counter-intelligence program with the

79 bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (Routledge., 2004), 3.
80 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 18.

explicit mission to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize"[81] Black male leaders. His expressed aim was to "prevent the rise of a [Black] messiah."[82] When a Black man emerges as an idealistic leader opposing white supremacist values regardless of his tactics,[83] he is considered a threat to white hegemony and removed *by any means necessary*. Another example of this can be seen through the violently obstructive social, cultural, and political forces actively working to undo the efforts of Barack Obama, America's first Black president, in essence, killing his legacy, the desired outcome being to deter others from "getting any ideas."

Beyond being alienating, I argue that the practice of patriarchal masculinity is also fiendishly disorienting. Robbed of language and, by extension, context and meaning, basic human concepts such as life and death become skewed, twisted and perverted. Black males are forced to try to make sense of the countless antagonistic forces which challenge their daily lives:

> For young poor urban Black men who regularly endured racism, police brutality, unemployment, as well as scrutiny from within black communities and from their own families, the social and cultural world young poor urban Black men created for themselves on the streets, in poolrooms, and even in the balconies of segregated movie theatres were places to commiserate over and recover from the absurdity of living within a culture of terror.[84]

However crucial these social spaces are, they often become mere microcosms of patriarchal violence. In his compelling documentary *Bastards of the Party,*[85] former gangbanger Cle "Bone" Sloan investigates the origins of gangs like the Crips and Bloods. He draws a lineage to social justice movements, claiming the gangs to be "the bastard offspring of the Black

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81 "COINTELPRO Black Extremist Part 01 of 23," FBI, May 05, 2011, , accessed January 14, 2018, https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro/cointel-pro-black-extremists/cointelpro-black-extremists-part-01-of/view.

82 Ibid.

83 See Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's non-violent Civil Rights movement.

84 Aimé J. Ellis, *If We Must Die From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 27.

85 *Bastards of the Party*, dir. Cle Sloan, 2005.

Panther Party."[86] He uncovers the gangs' origins as community-centric social clubs that sought to maintain the civic-minded agendas the BPP inspired. Ultimately, they devolved into warring factions of Black men. The very same flags (colors) which marked and identified the various gangs stripped them of their humanity, "making it easier to kill them and what they stood for" argues Sloan.[87] His sentiment highlights displays of patriarchal values and practices ill-suited and ill-fitting on the bodies of young Black men.

The social spaces occupied by young, poor, urban Black men remain awash in nihilism and fatalistic behaviors. Social historian Aimé Ellis explicitly suggests that hip hop is a site for such displays of self-directed violence and peril. Articulations (and fantasies) of patriarchal power are routinely espoused in rap music's glorification of guns, the male sexual gaze, and declarations of wealth and success. Rap culture is filled with examples of bad boys with death-defying and death-seeking ambitions, or what Ellis refers to as the "death-bound imaginary":

> Facing danger, the inevitability of prison (social death) and, or literal death from gun violence and sex, many of these Black men confront their fear and embrace the thug life as a kind of 'death-discovering' in which they indulge an intoxicating compulsion to consciously or unconsciously pursue their own death… 'Death-discovering' is an opening up, little by little, of the topography of death, a traversing back and forth into death's domain where the possibilities of exceeding life's limits are 'discovered' and radically explored.[88]

The death-bound imaginary provides a framework through which to both view and posit the effects of white supremacist racism on Black death and Black male culture. Given the extreme state of violence that perpetually confronts the Black male body, many young, poor, urban Black males develop a perverted relationship with death. Rather than embrace a

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Aimé J. Ellis, *If We Must Die From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 93.

diminished life, many instead court death as the only source of personal agency they possess. As described previously, the trauma endured in the brutal dismemberment of Black subjecthood through European conquest and domination has resulted in a significant loss of traditional values, customs and language. As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o argues, the dismemberment of the Black body has physical, cultural, social, and even spiritual implications. Thiong'o writes:

> To starve or kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank. And it is equally true that to impose a language is to impose the weight of experience it carries and its conception of self and otherness—indeed, the weight of its memory, which includes religion and education.[89]

Forced to adhere to white supremacist ideas and practices, the Black body is out of place and context, and lacks a true sense of cultural memory. Starved of our own expressions and cultural practices, we struggle to make meaning of our existence. The cultural and social languages forced upon us reinforces our subjugation and serves as a constant reminder that something about you, your existence, is abnormal.

My own experiences with African religious practice led me to consider the aspect of spirit in my work through the lens of Yoruba cosmology, also known as Ifa. Though largely attributed to the modern-day Yoruba in southwest Nigeria, the spiritual system dates back thousands of years. Carol Thompson, the Fred and Rita Richman Curator of African Art at the High Museum, has suggested that a "significant number of all Africans in the Americas are descended from Yoruba ancestors."[90] In fact, many African-based spiritual systems practiced throughout the Americas and the Caribbean can be directly traced to Ifa. Forced to practice their beliefs in secret, many enslaved Africans conflated Christian saints and Yoruba orisa forming hybridized versions of the original Ifa system. These creolized belief systems allowed for many

89 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), 20.

90 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 9.

aspects of this indigenous African ideology to adapt and remain effective. Today, the creolized versions of Ifa provide a pathway for devotees to return and reconnect with the traditional ways the religion is practiced. Though Ifa is commonly associated with the Yoruba, the belief system was commonly practiced throughout Central and West Africa and would have been familiar to a diverse range of tribal and ethnic groups. In studying Ifa, I found that questions and concepts around death are regularly woven into broader systems of understanding and provide a context that can work to affirm Black life. Like other indigenous African cultures, Ifa practice includes sophisticated theories, customs, vocabularies, and rituals that promote a different context and subsequently relationship with death and dying.

Malidoma Patrice Somé writes lucidly about the sophisticated system of death rituals and dying in his native Dagara tribe. In *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*, Somé describes the various requirements and levels of grieving for elaborate death rituals in Dagara society.[91] Like many West African cultures, the Dagara believe that death is not an end but instead a transition. Somé writes:

> Every person, male or female, who dies a normal death is given a full range of funeral ceremonies. If the dead are not given these ceremonies, the dead are stranded between worlds.[92]

In Ifa, the physical and spiritual worlds exist simultaneously as separate halves of one whole known as Igba Iwa. The top half represents the sky, the dwelling place of invisible spirits and a symbol of male cosmic energy. The bottom half is female energy. It is the birthplace of all life and the vessel which contains the primeval waters from which the physical world emerged. The two halves combine to form the whole. The balance between the two is paramount. Within Ifa, the practice of various rituals helps to maintain and ensure this sense of balance. Death is treated with reverence since it represents a transition not an end. The dead are honored with

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91 The Dagara is an ethnic group located north of the convergence of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire

92 Malidoma Patrice. Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community* (London: Arkana, 1998), 87.

intricate and specific customs. From ritual grief expressed in stages to the actual internment, a number of distinct funeral rites help propel the recently deceased forward, into the realm of the ancestors. Each stage involves a specific set of rules. For example, the rituals surrounding burial include everything from the position of the body to the items that may be included in the burial tomb.

Some of these practices can be found—though somewhat disconnected from their source—in cultural retentions and practices of Black America. In *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, Karla Holloway includes a citation from Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks*, in which Hurston describes being instructed to turn her then dying mother to face East. This act, along with other "detailed practices," were common within Black American culture at the beginning of the 20th century. These ritual practices can be linked to customs retained by our enslaved ancestors. According to Holloway, rituals such as covering mirrors, removing pillows, and stopping the clock, was widely observed within the Black community– primarily amongst women. Over time, as aspects of African customs became lost to dominant systems of power, the meaning and significance of these customs waned, becoming less obvious and effective.

It is through a direct connection to the past that Black people can be made whole by re-membering African spiritual ideas that reinforce and maintain the Black body. The ritual practice of ancestor worship in Ifa connects the physical and spiritual worlds, bringing harmony, balance, and understanding. Philip Neimark asserts, "Through ancestor worship, Ifa allows you to experience life as a continuum."[93] *Atunwa*, which means "character born again," points to the idea of reincarnation but not just for the sake of being born again; rather, it is an expression that demands one functions in life as a good citizen of Earth. The concept of reincarnation in Ifa is unique in that one is believed to return within one's own lineage. This belief shapes moral

93 Philip John. Neimark, *The Way of the Orisa: Empowering Your Life through the Ancient African Religion of Ifa* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 25.

and ethical behavior as it is believed you are the ancestor of your own future incarnation.[94] The ancestors, known as Egúngún represent one-third of the power of Ifa. Amanda Hellman, historian and curator of African Art at the Michael C. Carlos Museum Emory University, argues that "Egúngún means 'the powers concealed' in the Yoruba language; the mask and masquerade give shape to spirits and ancestors that otherwise cannot be seen."[95]

Egúngún breaks with Western theories of the conclusiveness of death. As re-animated spirits, the Egúngún represent the "living dead". Revered and respected, they are not feared as they come to entertain and heal as well as serving to remind humanity of its purpose, power, and possibility:

> "The annual Egúngún festival is a joyful period in a community… The festival offers an opportunity to renew old ties with long departed ancestors who are now physically present (as masked figures) among the living, praying for their well-being and participating in rituals aimed at cleansing the community of disease and other harmful elements."[96]

The Egúngún masquerade also symbolizes power and authority as they may also serve justice and settle communal disputes.[97]

The existence of Egúngún is a powerful form of resistance to the spectacle of Black Death. The very presence of Egúngún defies the idea that white supremacist violence can end you. The Egúngún becomes a new type of spectacle, whirling, jumping, pulsing; the spirit is alive and filled with energy and excitement. The performance of Egúngún functions as a tangible link to the ancestors while signaling healing and memory. The creation of an Egúngún mask, therefore, is a major source of social and cultural pride as well as familial legacy. Materials

94 Awo Fá'Lokun. Fatunmbi, *Egún: The Ifa Concept of Ancestor Reverence* (United States: Awo Falokun Fatunmbi, 2013), 2.
95 Fahamu Pecou et al., *Visible Man: Fahamu Pecou*, ed. Mark Sloan (Charleston, SC: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016), 151.
96 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 76.
97 Ibid.

sourced for these elaborate costumes vary widely and may include colorful fabrics, animal skins, leaves, raffia, leather, and more. These costumes are typically multicolored and multi-textured symbolizing the diversity of the Egúngún. The end result is a patchwork of fabrics, bells, coins, mirrors, shells, and other magical elements that help transport and empower Egúngún.

Based on traditional Egún practices, the central figure of *Do or Die* is a modernized version of a traditional Egúngún masquerade (Fig. 16). The *New World Egúngún* departs slightly as it incorporates visible elements of both African and African American culture. The mask is designed to honor the spirits of the countless scores of Black men slain by acts of racialized violence. As opposed to the typical brightly colored fabrics used in traditional masks, the *New World Egúngún* is built on a motif of white fabric. *Funfun* (white) in Yoruba connotes the link between humanity and the divine. It also has healing and cooling properties. The white aesthetic functions to assuage the trauma of Black death. In keeping with Egún costume traditions the style and material of white fabrics are varied and diverse, representing the various and unique characteristics and qualities of the Egún. Sewn into the costume are 16 brass bells of various sizes (Fig. 17). The number 16 corresponds with the system of divine numerology in Ifa. Concepts of divine order, creation, and destiny are described in 16 variables of the human experience, making 16 a significant number in Yoruba cosmology. This number also corresponds with the divine mathematics in the Yoruba divination system.

Connecting the Egúngún to contemporary visual language, the mask incorporates elements of hip hop fashion. The head covering of the costume is a repurposed hoodie covered in cowrie shells. The hoodie is a nod to slain teenager, Trayvon Martin. Additionally, the mask features white sweatpants and white Nike sneakers, also representative hip-hop fashion. Finally, the costume features a cowrie-shell head covering that also functions as a mask, ensuring protection as well as masking the wearer. As Babatunde Lawal explains:

Of course, many people are aware that a human being is under a typical Egúngún. Yet

> there is a general belief that the rite of passage undergone by the masquerader before donning the costume has converted his body into a kind of receptacle for the soul of an ancestor. Consequently, the masquerader is a mask within a mask; he is no longer himself.[98]

Mirroring the colorful cloths and materials on a traditional Egúngún, the *New World Egúngún* also features panels of fabric that flair and bounce as it moves. However, the lappets on the *New World* mask honors victims of 3 generations of Black men killed through acts of racist violence by name. Strips of fabric reference men who were killed during Jim Crow-era lynching, the 1960s Civil Rights movement, and the contemporary era of police-involved shootings of unarmed Black men. Their names appear as follows:

> Martin (Luther King Jr.) & Medgar (Evers) & George (Jackson) & Malcolm (X) & James (Meredith) & Virgil (Ware) & Jimmie (Lee Jackson) & Ben (Chester White) & Herbert (Lee) & Clementa (Pinckney) & Emmett (Till) Abram (S. Smith) & Sam (Hose) & Michael (Donald) & Anthony (Crawford) & Saxe (Joiner) & Dan (Pippen Jr) & Henry (Smith) & James (T. Scott) & Amadou (Diallo) & Oscar (Grant) & Sean (Bell) & Trayvon (Martin) & Michael (Brown) & Eric (Garner) & John & Jordan (Davis) & Tamir (Rice) & Walter (Scott) & Freddie (Gray) &…

The list is inconclusive owing to the fact that many names cannot be called. As a living, breathing object, the masquerade is constructed such that additional lappets (names) may be added, further growing the power of the Egún.

An Egúngún is not a static object; its true power is revealed in the performance of the masquerade. As noted by Hellman, "It is in the performance, when the panels are activated by the breeze and the drums tell stories as the dancer moves that the mask is seen as it is meant to be."[99] Activating the Egúngún through ritual performance is essential to its functionality. For the

98 Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art, 2007), 81.

99 Fahamu Pecou et al., *Visible Man: Fahamu Pecou*, ed. Mark Sloan (Charleston, SC: Halsey Institute of Contem-



Fig. 16
New World Egúngún (installation view)



Fig. 17
New World Egúngún (installation view/detail)

opening of the inaugural public exhibition of the work, the *New World Egúngún* performed an *elevation ritual* designed to call for community healing as well as to unburden the spirits of those individuals whose violent deaths were never remedied. Elevation rituals are typically performed as a part of a broader collection of grief rituals. The elevation ritual may also be performed in times of trauma or when a deceased person did not receive the proper rites or an appropriate burial. The elevation ritual works to both heal the tormented spirit and repair any imbalance in the life/death continuum.

Do or Die was initially installed at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston in Charleston, S.C. The Halsey Institute is situated on King Street in Charleston, a few steps away from Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and a few blocks away from Charleston's waterfront. Now the site of the International African American Museum, Gadsden Wharf was at one point the singular point of entry in the U.S. for enslaved Africans. Records suggest that at least 100,000 enslaved Africans entered through the port between 1767 and 1807 when the import of enslaved Africans was banned.[100] Considering the histories of violence during slavery, the Egúngún's emergence from Gadsden Wharf in downtown Charleston marks a significant act of reconciliation. Calling on the deceased ancestors of enslaved Africans who died both in transit and on the shores of the American south, the Egúngún receives the blessing of those tragic souls while drawing on their power. The procession continues along King Street, a main Charleston thoroughfare, stopping at Emanuel AME church. Also known as "Mother Emanuel", the church holds a rich and deep position in African American history. Initially erected in 1812, it is one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. A Charleston landmark, the church was a significant site for organizing marches and protests during the Civil Rights movement. In June 2015, while developing the work for *Do or Die*, I watched in disbelief as news stations reported a heinous shooting within the sacred walls of Emanuel AME. Nine Black parishioners participating in Bible study were shot to death by a self-

porary Art, 2016), 152.

100 Data sourced from the International African American Museum. IAAMuseum.org

proclaimed white nationalist. It was an act of terrorism. The shooting had a harrowing impact on the Charleston community and on me, personally. The Egúngún's arrival at Mother Emanuel performs a community healing and spiritual cleansing while gathering still the power and energy of those slain victims. Transforming them from victims to honored ancestors and powerful spiritual allies, the Egúngún performance concludes in the gallery space, activating the other works in the exhibition and giving further meaning and significance to the texts.

Subsequent to the performance, embedded with the collected asé of these spirits, The *New World Egúngún* masquerade is displayed in the exhibit alongside a series of photographs of the costume. The exhibit also features digital video of the dancing Egún projected into a pool of water. This silent video, titled "Water and Spirit," features the masquerade in performance, literally floating on the surface of a body of water. The piece references the importance of water, or *omi*, in Ifa rituals. Omi is cleansing and purifying. Omi is also significant as a mode of transport, guiding life into and out of the physical world. Omi represents the amniotic fluid of the womb that sustains and protects the fetus as well as ushers new life into the world. In death, omi is literally and symbolically significant as it is said that a spirit travels home on a river of a million tears.

The power of Egúngún is apotropaic and its impact cannot be overstated. In fact, its power is simply too overwhelming to try to describe in words. However, as the Black body—and particularly Black men's bodies—wrestle to find meaning in the face of unyielding violence, the performance of Egúngún serves as a crucial and curative intervention. Its presence captures the essence of spirit in *Do or Die*. It not only counteracts the spectacle of Black death, but it provides a language that grounds and connects the Black body to its own physical, cultural, social, and psychological memory. So, no, none of us will get out of here alive, but Egúngún shows us the way back.

Chapter 5

New World Egúngún



New World Egúngún 1
40x40 in
Digital C-Print



New World Egúngún 2
40x40 in
Digital C-Print



New World Egúngún 3
40x40 in
Digital C-Print



New World Egúngún 4
40x40 in
Digital C-Print



Water & Spirit
Installation View
Digital Video



Water & Spirit
Installation view
Digital Video

Amadou&
Oscar&
Sean&
Trayvon&
Michael&
Eric&
John&
Jordan&
Tamir&
Walter&
Freddy&

New World Egúngún
Detail 1

Emmitt&
Abram&
Thomas&
Sam&
Willie&
Michael&
Anthony&
Saxe&
Dan&
Henry&
James&

New World Egúngún
Detail 2

Martin&
Medgar&
George&
Fred&
Malcolm&
James&
Virgil&
Jimmie&
Ben&
Herbert&
Clementa&

New World Egúngún
Detail 3



Pecou, Fahamu. “Elevation Ritual.” 27 Aug. 2016, Charleston, S.C.



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography



Elevation Ritual
Photo by Karson Photography

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance

Conclusion

"For it is not enough to decide on the basis of its effect—Death. It still remains to be decided which death, that which is brought by life or that which brings life. – Jacques Lacan, *Écrits.*

The recent spate of violence against young Black men is a gruesome reminder of the pervasive threat of death against Black bodies. Our media landscape is inundated with the faces of Black boys and men along with captions that detail their often violent and untimely deaths – often at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve them. Other times, these images portray the twisted and fatalistic attempts by young, poor, urban Black men to exert some form power. Desperate acts of violence turn inward, plaguing Black communities with death by our own hands. These images have become a ubiquitous sight, a spectacle of Black Death. Though not new, the velocity of these harrowing images has increased exponentially over the years. The spectacle of death has become synonymous with the Black experience.

Violence against Black bodies is endemic. Used to coerce Black conformity to white patriarchal authority, the terror of physical destruction has historically worked to disrupt and dehumanize Black communities. From the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade to Jim Crow to this present era of mass incarceration, Black men's bodies have maintained a peculiar proximity to the threat

of death. This spectacle of death remains a visceral inevitability instilling fear and panic, but perhaps worst of all - despair.

Considering how the campaign of violence and destruction have dehumanized Black people and worked to dis-member the Black conceptual body, this dissertation attempts to re-contextualize concepts of Black life and death. This project performs an elevation ritual. It seeks to mitigate the pain and trauma of the countless Black men whose deaths linger as haunting reminders. By elevating these spirits, I hope to help restore balance and healing in the Black community and beyond. Additionally, this project attempts to reorient Black bodies within the context of its own cultural, social, and spiritual memory. Employing the power of visual art, performance, and ritual, this project extends beyond the limits of conventional language and into the phenomenological. *Do or Die* provides a resistance to the threat and spectacle of death by re-membering the conceptual Black body and rearticulating aspects of the physical body, mind and spirit.

Through themes and concepts rooted in the traditional African spiritual system of Ifa, *Do or Die* reframes the way life and death are viewed and understood. Working to restore balance in expressions of Black life through Ifa concepts, the project engages in making the Black body whole. *Do or Die* centers on the powerful and transformative function of Egúngún to heal and transform. Egúngún is the practice of living ancestors whose spiritual presence in the physical world provide an indelible bond between the material and the sacred. In these works, both death and life exist as liminal rather than finite spaces. In stripping away the stigma of death's finality, the threat of death no longer holds weight.

Art is a powerful vehicle through which the spectacle of Black Death can be resisted. Through ritual and performance as well as painting and drawing, the affective power of image and movement transcends words and possess the ability to deeply penetrate where traditional

language cannot. *Do or Die* considers affect as resistance.

Do or Die becomes a spectacle towards a new form of communication, one that distances itself from the terror and violence typically associated with Black bodies. It affirms life and life beyond following vocabularies of indigenous African ideologies that language death as a space of renewal and rebirth. Ideologies that affirm rather than negate Black life. It reclaims what has been lost, turning our gaze inward and ultimately forward. Through ritual, performance, and image, *Do or Die: Affect Ritual Resistance* confronts the implication of death's dominion. Ultimately, it is a reminder of an intimate balance that affirms life. It is art as affective resistance. It is a healing.

Asé.

Attachments:

1. *Emmett Still: A Short Film by Fahamu Pecou*
Pecou F., Mason K.(Producers). (2016). *Emmett Still* [DVD].

2. *Emmett Still: Original Soundtrack*
Pecou F., Mason K.(Producers). (2016). *Emmett Still* [CD].

Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance
Opening Performance

3. *Do or Die Fahamu Pecou Charleston 2016*
Peart, B. (Videographer). (2016). *Do or Die Fahamu Pecou Charleston 2016* [DVD].

4. *Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*
Opening Performance / Opening Reception, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art
Karson Photography. (Photographer). (2016). [Digital Photo Album/CD].

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