Towards a Poetics of Bafflement:

The Politics of Elsewhere in Contemporary Black Diaspora Visual Practice (1990–Present)

by

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Abstract

Towards a Poetics of Bafflement asserts that blackness baffles—confuses and frustrates—the order of knowledge that deems black subjectivities as pathological. This dissertation argues for the importance of the psychic and affective spaces that emerge in the work of contemporary black women and queer artists. A poetics of bafflement is foregrounded by racial slavery and diaspora formations that inform contemporary racial antagonisms. The visual work of Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, and Mickalene Thomas, if read through a poetics of bafflement, engages blackness differently and conceptualizes new possibilities for world making. Black artists have long since occupied spaces of creative and critical thinking about aesthetics, race, and the politics of vision, which inform contemporary social, historical, and cultural climates.

Multiculturalism and subsequent post-race concepts are inadequate in thinking about alternative possibilities of world making as they suggest racism and anti-black sentiment are somehow no longer prevalent. Multiculturalism’s claim of diversity negates the continued logics of anti-black sentiment, whereas post-racial suggests a time and place in history where race no longer informs political, economic, and socio-cultural experiences. Black cultural production continues to be at the crossroads of these debates. The complex interplay between race anxieties and the politics of
contemporary visual culture remains opaque, even as it proliferates. Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, and Mickalene Thomas are among a generation of artists who have gained a certain level of North American and European recognition. Common to many of these artists is a concern with the limits of form and genre, particularly in relation to the photographic image, the queer body and the undoing of gender, and ruminations on desire and the erotic. Towards a Poetics of Bafflement responds to the absence of affect studies in addressing racial slavery—and, specifically, bafflement’s imprint on the present.
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List of Artists and Artworks
Introduction: Black Visual Archives, Cultural Production and Postmodernity

**vi·gnette** /vinˈyet/ noun

1. a brief evocative description, account, or episode.
2. a small illustration or portrait photograph that fades into its background without a definite border.

By way of origins, my interest in visuality and blackness has been motivated by my own experiences as an artist and a scholar. My academic studies were always interested in images, and it was photographs that held my attention as if some unstated claims on seeing and being seen could be made. In university, I wrote a thesis on the photography of *Sistagrapy*, an Atlanta-based collective of black women photographers. But it was my master’s studies that brought me into contact with a working definition of diaspora as an analytic. Here, I was given the opportunity to photograph a small contingent of black queer and trans folks residing in Philadelphia. These friends and acquaintances graciously allowed me to photograph and inquire into their lives. Often in the most intimate of ways we discussed the meaning of belonging at the intersections of blackness and queerness. While providing a temporary refuge, ultimately, the claims to a unified community were parochial and tenuous. For how do you make sense of community when belonging itself is debatable? I continue to believe that art communicates such tensions because its modes of translation exceed language. While this is a romantic definition of the visual and its abilities, theorizing through art objects remains an endeavour that I am invested in. What follows are three vignettes that navigate some of the early questions of art, its implications for belonging and underlying questions of this research.

**November 2, 2013, 55th Venice Biennale Venice, Italy, The Encyclopedia Palace.** Travelling is difficult. I am constantly made aware of what makes my own movements—and those of others—precarious. To be foreign asks that one notices how the metropolis draws lines of demarcation. Venice is no exception, and how people inhabit it is tenuous. Juxtaposed against such a landscape, La Biennale di Venezia exists. This year’s theme imagines a palace that holds all the world’s knowledge, the thought experiment of 1950s Italian inventor and artist Marino Autori.
He actually patented blueprints of such a place. I wonder what is at stake in imagining such an institution. I cannot help but think of the pitfalls. For example, this is the first time Angola has exhibited at the festival. Imagining an institution that holds all the worlds’ knowledge struggles through the archive, between what is lost and unacknowledged.

May 10, 2011, Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington DC, 30 Americans. They called this exhibition 30 Americans. However, the work is produced by 30 black Americans. In hindsight, I understand the implications or desires to articulate the work as such. The show presents a blockbuster exhibit of the great artists of the contemporary moment. New generations are displayed amongst an old generation of African American art celebrity: Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Barkley L. Hendrick alongside Shinique Smith and Mickalene Thomas. Twenty years after Golden’s articulation of post-black art what can be made of the move to 30 Americans?

October 10, 2010, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario, Positioned as Desired: Exploring African Canadian Identity. The Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada is one half of the Suite of Canadian Galleries. The entrance to the suite demands that you first encounter Dawit Petro’s, Signs. A young black man holds closed the zipper of a Canadian Goose parka. Marquis de Montcalm, a British commander during the seven-year war, flanks the figure to the left. To the right of Signs is the person for whom the gallery is named: Sigmund Samuel, industrial giant of steel. If industry and militarism are two pillars of nation-state formation, where does Petro’s figure sit in such a narrative?

Towards a Poetics of Bafflement: the Politics of Elsewhere in Contemporary Black Visual Culture (1990–Present) examines the precarity of blackness and belonging. This project is concerned with how discourses of blackness circulate through visual and affective manifestations in the work of contemporary black art. Interrogating how racial slavery and diaspora come to bear on black cultural production, I argue that blackness baffles. Bafflement is theorized as a series of relationships between the effects of racial slavery on the present moment and on black diaspora praxis. Bafflement provides a set of methodologies for engaging black cultural production. This incorporates a system of methods that include etymological calculation, performative strategies and affective pause. In short, a theory of bafflement works to unsettle the seamlessness of pathological meaning tied to ontological blackness. In this way, bafflement
disrupts meaning by exposing an experience of frustration associated with art objects by black cultural producers.

The ontology of blackness is made legible through the haunting of racial slavery and black diaspora formations. The historicity of racial slavery bears on present time through continued racial antagonism. In this way, blackness is mobilized through psychic articulations of disavowal, accumulation, and fungibility. Given the trade in breathing property and simultaneous negation of subjecthood into civil society, racial slavery produced a system of absolute domination. Fungibility resulted in the interchangeable and exchangeable qualities of the slave with no control over their existence. Black diaspora formations through dispersal and contact are equally important to a discourse of blackness. Significant to black diaspora are the continual scattering and contact between populations that remake blackness. A theory of bafflement relies on the tensions between violence and creation figured in racial slavery and diaspora. Bafflement asks that we work with, and not against, violence. Contributions by black diaspora and black cultural studies scholars have been important in holding the tensions between violence and creation.

The development of bafflement relies on interdisciplinarity between scholarship, approach, and object of study. The nature of bafflement requires overlapping historical trajectories and analytical approaches in order to disrupt meaning as stagnant and fixed. Cross-discipline and multi-discipline strategies exemplify the cross flow of method and theory, ultimately suggesting barriers between genres are porous. Bafflement necessitates blackness as multivocal. Within bafflement’s formation is a critique of the development of knowledge itself. Multidisciplinary strategies are attuned to the notion that the genealogy of ideas and the constitution of multiple branches of knowledge are always in process. Utilization of interdisciplinary approaches for bafflement allows for recognition of knowledge as unfinished, as actively shifting and being reimagined. Roland Barthes states, “To do something interdisciplinary it is not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one” (quoted in Gordon, 2008, p. 12). To be interdisciplinary means to construct new spaces of inquiry, analysis, and method that cannot be tied to one genre of study. It is through interdisciplinarity that bafflement can imagine its full potential.
Contemporary black art is the object of study and assists in the development of a poetics of bafflement within the archive. Various forms of cultural production, documents, and ephemera are utilized. Works by artists displayed in exhibition and gallery spaces—together with reproductions through catalogues, monographs and online databases—are referenced. Popular culture materials such as website content, newspaper articles, interviews, and press releases add to the documents forming the basis of this study. The above resources, utilized with a constellation of visual, textual, and social analysis, provide further inquiry into the relationship between black visual culture, affect, and bafflement.

The archive is not only an important source of information, but also a site of theorizing about black subjectivities through bafflement. Scholars (including Halberstam and Cvetovich) have argued that the archive is more than an institution and set of documents that record and log historical impulses. The archive negotiates material realities and emotional labours that adhere to objects. Bafflement needs to imagine the archive as expansive because its very structure relies on experiences that are not only omitted from mainstream archival spaces but are also often intangible. Because the ontology of blackness is fraught, its archives are often nontraditional and have included the kitchen table and community and public cultural spaces, such as barbershops and beauty parlours, queer dance floors, and grassroots activist organizations. Jack Halberstam (2005) argues towards a definition of the archive as a theory of cultural relevance that is constructed through cultural memory and reflects the multilayered record of experience (pp. 169–170). For the artists in this study, the black visual archive(s) is (are) multilayered and draw(s) from traditional and non-traditional materials and reference points.

I also turn to conversations and sentiments that circulate around works of art. The ephemeral and the feelings placed on material and cultural objects produce further layers to the archive. The ephemerality of archives serves to expose bafflement to sites of excavation and does not solely function for recovery of the self in relation to omission of colonial archives. Rather, bafflement draws ephemerality as a critical source of contestation about the past, particularly as blackness seeks to locate its ontological claims in social and historical contexts. Furthermore, the archive unpacks and reveals the contours of emotional labour. Feeling adheres to objects, events, and institutions that comprise multilayered archives. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) notes how cultural texts act as the reservoir of feelings and emotions that are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but also in the practice that surrounds their production and reception (p. 7). These
spaces, particularly because they are forged from racial and sexual difference, leave unusual traces. Because of racial and sexual antagonism, objects of such an archive often remain, in the parlance of Ellison (2010), invisible or hypervisible and require particular strategies to reveal them. Bafflement provides one such stratagem to apprehend unusual traces of black visual archives.

The constitution of the archive continues to be an important source of inquiry for theorizing radical human possibilities. The project of bafflement is situated in broader pan-global black art movements of the twenty-first century. The Schomburg Research Collection (Brooklyn, USA), Autograph ABP (London, UK) and the Institute of International Visual Arts (Berlin, Germany) have been instrumental to contextualizing transnationalism. The biennial practices of the last thirty years—specifically the emergence of biennials focusing on Africa and the black diaspora (e.g., Bamako Encounters and the changing landscape of the Venice Biennale)—have helped to contextualize the latest global trends in black diaspora art production. I work with artists who forge connections with national locations (e.g., Canada, United States, South Africa, and United Kingdom) but whose creative practices reflect diaspora hybridization. The black visual archive with which this project works then emerges from differing historical contexts in black diaspora formation and must continue to be seen as inextricably linked to legacies of racial slavery and colonialism. A theory and application of bafflement to black art production must engage multiple histories, interdisciplinary strategies and archives.

Data Analysis and Aesthetic Deciphering Practices

The deciphering strategies of Sylvia Wynter (1992) are central to a theory of bafflement and the archival and interdisciplinary scholarship deployed in this study. Deciphering practices refer to a set of processes of reading for omissions and significations in texts. These strategies attune a reading to complex utterances that uncover the institutions and cultural norms attached to a subject or object. Wynter’s use of the deciphering practice pays particular attention to black diaspora lives, legacies of racial slavery, and histories of the liberal human. A deciphering practice provides an important critique of traditional and nontraditional texts and expands upon the archaological processes of knowledge production articulated by Foucault (1972). Rinaldo Walcott (2003a) notes black diaspora deciphering strategies provide modes of reading (and
seeing) that engage the postcolonial context to determine what a text or image intends to do (p. 59). From this perspective, reading (seeing) occurs on multiple levels.

Wynter outlines a deciphering practice through four intertwined stages. First, deciphering an object of study must account for how the signifying practice of the text itself registers. Next, the social and cultural dimensions of the text unfold additional sites of meaning. A matrix of symbol and matter, structured by codes of behavior, are revealed in this unfolding; these codes of behavior emerge in the context of the object and bring the text itself into being. The third stage brings the results of the earlier stages into focus and requires consideration of what the performative and representational signifying practices of the text are intended to do. What collective behaviors they are intended to incite and how precisely does that signification practice provide ways to shift, alter, and/or retain the status quo of our habits? Finally, the most important stage of the reading practice exposes the place from which one might constitute a new humanism. For Wynter, this is the beginning of a critique of present conceptions of the human and a shift towards “new forms of human life” (Walcott, 2003a, p. 59; Wynter, 1992, p. 267).

Wynter’s deciphering practice can be mobilized towards visual texts and, in particular, the work of bafflement.

The vignettes deployed in the beginning of this introduction present the formations of a visual reading practice aligned with the goals of bafflement. In pictorial vernacular, the vignette is a small illustration or portrait photograph that fades into the background of the paper without a definitive border. A blurred circular frame is, however, created within the boundaries of the pictorial space. This frame is often obstructed via the process of exposing the film plane to light, leaving the outer edges of the image hazy, greyed, and often indiscernible. I utilize this tool of the vignette and its frame within a frame to gesture to the distortions of materiality and theory that it brings forth. If the vignette blurs, refocuses, and reshapes the boundary of discernible visual content, the act of vignetting a text embodies Wynter’s mode of deciphering.¹ Bafflement, ¹ For more on Wynter’s use of deciphering practice and its relationship to slavery, the plantation, and racial antagonisms see, Katherine McKittrick (2013), “Plantation Futures,” Small Axe, 17(3), 1–15. For Walcott’s use of deciphering practice, see Rinaldo Walcott (2003a), “But I Don’t Want to Talk About That: Postcolonial and Black Diaspora Histories in Video Art,” in editor U. Biemann’s, Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age (pp. 58–65), New York: Springer Wien.

as a strategy of confusion, utilizes the act of interference to interrogate preconceived associations of ontological blackness. Like the vignette, bafflement blurs and refocuses meaning through a practice of inquiry and confusion.

Bricolage and assemblage, as multi-referential tools, provide adages to bafflement as deciphering practice. These terms have overlapping uses in the fields of visual culture, art history, linguistics and aesthetics. Bricolage refers to the creation of a work through the use of a diverse range of materials that are available. Contemporary qualitative theorist Joe Kincheloe (2005) investigates bricolage as a form of multidisciplinary research and inquiry, in which he states,

On one level, the bricolage can be described as the process of getting down to the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research. Ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, historiography, discourse analysis combined with philosophical analysis, literary analysis, aesthetic criticism, and theatrical and dramatic ways of observing and making meaning constitute the methodological bricolage. In this way, bricoleurs move beyond the blinds of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production. (p. 323)

Bricolage blurs disciplinary boundaries through its concern with networks of relation that contribute to meaning making. How one might conceive of knowledge, then, is attuned to the multitextual landscapes that emerge through bricolage. In art practices, bricolage creates something by amalgamating a diverse range of available resources, much like the qualitative process outlined by Kincheloe. Assemblage, similarly, functions as a term utilized in visual studies as well as in disciplines with a focus on queer theory and affect. Jasbir Puar (2007) first considers the impact of homonormativity in normalizing the queer figure while making deviant

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2 Bricolage borrows from the French verb *bricoler*, meaning to tinker or fiddle with. Claudé Lévi-Strauss, in “The Savage Mind” (1962) first utilized the term as a means to consider methods of expression through selection and synthesis of materials used from surrounding culture. Jacques Derrida later (1966) applied bricolage to literary criticism and discourse.
the terrorist body. Puar articulates assemblage as a conceptual tool to note textures, corporalities, and affectivities that implode and explode in the figuration of the nonnormative body or object of knowledge. Assemblage functions as a series of cross flows of engagements among contexts, identifications, and contingencies that circulate in an event. Visual vernaculars define assemblage as a process of creation of three-dimensional works through the use of available resources. Like Puar’s mobilization of assemblage, the visual relies on contextual components of design. A theory of bafflement can be productively characterized as a series of assemblages. Much like the previous discussion of interdisciplinarity, assemblage and bricolage through interpellation reveal visual deciphering strategies essential to bafflement’s theorization.

Bafflement, as visual deciphering practice located within interdisciplinary archives, moves beyond the formalistic qualities of a visual text; it mobilizes resources and references to express a more dynamic set of interpretations of meaning. Modes of circulation alongside what people do with the object further shape bafflement as visual deciphering practice.

**Bafflement’s Constellations: Relation, Queer, and What Is Black Now**

Three overlapping constellations animate a theory of bafflement as visual deciphering practice. The significance of such a collection of ideas is reflected in the title of this project: *Towards a Poetics of Bafflement: A Politics of Elsewhere in Contemporary Black Visual Culture (1990–Present)* utilizes an engagement with relation, queer iterations of bafflement, and the present conjecture to expose how contemporary black art negotiates belonging, rearticulates fixed claims to the nation, undoes gender, and engages the limits of form and genre.

As visual deciphering practice, bafflement requires relation to engage with contemporary black art. Because contemporary black art represents multiple dispersals and encounters, relation exposes the terms of contact. Edouard Glissant’s (1997) theorization of a poetics of relation develops such terms of contact. His theory of relation offers a meditation on the abyss, symbol of the middle passage, to imagine the experience of encounter as a site of diversification. Recalling forced dispersal, Glissant is wary not to over theorize diversity as universal or nonviolent but, rather, to engage diversity as an act of circling around the indefinable. Relation emerges through a complex association between ancestral identity (atavistic identifications) and colonial oppressions. Where the genesis of relation is the hull of the slave ship (pp. 5–7), colonial
oppression formulates sites of creolization (p. 89). This interplay between identification and relation requires that subject positions be achieved beyond the bounds of explicit opposition to the oppressor (Skerritt, 2012). Glissant reminds that all relation emerges through an encounter with the Other. Through the clashing of cultures the Other evolves, creating the circumstances for relation: “Evolving cultures infer Relation—the overstepping that grounds their unity in diversity” (p. 1).

While Glissant draws contrast between atavistic and composite cultures of creolization, the process of creolization develops new forms of identity guided by principles of errantry and hybridity. The strength of creolization is in the process is deploys and not its content (p. 89). Hybridity enables creolized cultures to recognize instances of the Other as one part of a multiplicity of difference (p. 79). Such a multiplicity is an asset and forms unity in diversity. Put differently, “Relation is the moment when we realize that there is a definite quality of all the differences in the world” (Glissant, 2011, p. 9). Glissant is most interested in defining the contemporary moment, but also in revising understandings of modernity. My theorization of bafflement and its poetics is indebted to Glissant’s language of relation. By asking that modernity reckon with creolization Glissant imagines an annotated version of modernity that acknowledges the contributions of blackness to the history of the world.

Scholars in the fields of sociology, cultural studies, and political science have been concerned with how nation-making practices utilize cultural production as an object of analysis. Often, cultural institutions illuminate practices of state and civic institutional control through art objects (Bannerji, 2000; Hall, 1980; Mackey, 2012; Yuval-Davis & Werbner, 1999). These scholars are interested in the way cultural institutions are implicated in reproducing cohesive national and cultural ideologies through everyday governance. Kobena Mercer’s (1999) example of the clash between cultural ideals in 1980s’ Britain proves informative here. Mercer begins by noting the precarious space black artists find themselves in amidst the rise of art-world globalization and regressive local modernism. Mercer highlights how the emergence of the local young British artists (YBA) movement exposed contradictions in the national discourse of culture by relying on regressive modernist approaches. Simultaneously, the shift to hypervisibility through normative multiculturalism suggested that racial difference could no longer be up for debate (p. 54). Clashes between the YBA and the incorporation of visible minorities through multiculturalism became the precarious circumstances in which black artists sought to “slip out
of tendencies towards fixity in the visual management of cultural difference” (p. 57). Mercer’s argument suggests that black artists of the time struggled with identifying their work, in part, due to antagonisms from local movements and the speak-not challenges of the multicultural project. While this is not an exhaustive example of the pitfalls of blackness and visibility within global contexts, it does illuminate tensions between cultural ideologies of difference and national narratives of belonging. Theories of nation making and the aesthetic and cultural questions that are often intermeshed provide an important perspective on racial difference and visuality in relation to subjects in the nation. Glissant’s theory of relation encourages a critique of tenuous modes of production and narrativization of encounters between the Other that are important to contemporary black visuality. Relation provides a strategy with which to decipher the implications of the nation in incorporating cultural minorities into national narratives of belonging. Simultaneously, relation assists in reworking the modernist project of the nation, whereby such incorporations actually propel and rupture traditional forms of existence.

This project and a theorization of bafflement are concerned with a series of contrapuntal dialogues on the uses of queer theorization. The last twenty years have seen a shift in the use of queer to connote meaning outside of identitarian politics. Black feminist scholarship has been instrumental in facilitating such shifts in queer theorization by mobilized intersectional reading practices alongside aesthetic texts (Crenshaw, 1989; Dove, 1986; Jordan, 2003; Lorde, 1984). The term queer emerged into public consciousness in the 1990s as a critique of normalizing subjectivities that coalesce in sexual subjects (Eng, Halberstam, & Munoz, 2005, p. 1); “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now,” a special edition of the journal Social Text, brought together a younger generation of scholars who mobilized queer as a means to think differently about a series of historical contingencies, including neoliberalism, the collapse of the welfare state, and the war on terrorism (pp.1–2). The authors state,

“The contemporary mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity—as mass mediated consumer lifestyle and embattled category—demands a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent.” (Eng, Halberstam, & Munoz, 2005, p. 1)

Such a shift occurs concurrent with queer-of-colour engagements.
The term *queer-of-colour critique* emerges out of Roderick Ferguson’s (2004) assertion that categorizations of sexuality on the sociological imagination of blackness marks race as perverse. Furthermore, in his contribution to “What’s Queer” Ferguson (2005) warns against queer studies making sexuality the salient property of the field. Instead, he recentres intersectional and interdisciplinary strategies by asking “in what ways has the racialized, classed and gendered discourse known as sexuality dispersed itself to constitute this particular discipline or interdisciplinary?” (p. 4). Queer-of-colour critique provides a tool kit to question the notion of the black figure as pathological. More broadly, a queer-of-colour critique asks that black studies scholarship continue to grapple with sexuality and diaspora and that queer theory engage with anti-blackness. Bafflement necessitates queer theorization at the intersections of difference in order to make possible the act of frustration. Queer studies that pay critical attention to sexuality and the governing logics of knowledge production insists that investigations of normalization and intersectionality continue to be broached. Bafflement figured queerly offers opportunity to make visible the terms of normalization and difference in black art production while holding space for the tensions between violence and creation.

The last thirty years represents the third overlapping constellation in this study. The limits of multiculturalism and the post-racial illuminate the importance of utilizing history for bafflement. An important distinction emerges between using canonize history as origin narrative and the absolute dismissal of historical projects. Deconstructive approaches to history provide alternative narratives and texts to mobilize bafflement. The period from the 1990s to the present thinks intentionally about marked shifts in global history that inform art. Multiculturalism and the proliferation of postracial discourses have undermined a renewed sense of racial antagonism. The 1990s were significant in global art markets as debates about representation, transnationalism, and difference circulated alongside a paradoxical return to nationalism. The “turn” to multiculturalism (institutionalized and otherwise) has unquestionably informed how and in what ways black diaspora art shapes cultural taste. As Mercer (1999) observes regarding

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1990s’ art and culture in Britain—in which the incorporation of hybridized practices of diaspora into corporate internationalism occurred alongside regressive localism that sought to position a nationalist art identity—black diaspora artists found themselves in a space like their post-civil-rights counterparts (p. 55). He states, “Like their trans-Atlantic counterparts . . . they arrived into a habitus in which the de-funding of public subsidy gave the market a greater role in distributing opportunities for hitherto ‘minority artists’” (p. 55). In contrast to the late ’80s, he continues, where galleries represented minority artists, the late 1990s presented commercial galleries that had one or two artists of colour on their roster. He concludes, “Diversity is now normal, not ‘special’” (p. 55).

Post-racial arrives quite late in the litany of twenty-first-century “posts.” Post implies a length of time and chronological transference, like postcolonial and postmodern. Sharma and Sharma (2012) note that while racism can be considered a contemporary phenomenon, it is often secondary to debates on class and economy or framed within a litany of pluralities and differences in multiculturalist discourses. For anti-racism scholars, the postracial marks a turn to the proliferation of racism, particularly through its critical disavowal. The postracial suggests a colour-blindness and claims that racism no longer exists Sharma and Sharma state,

Arguably, while post-race is not explicitly articulated, it acts as the discursive frame for race talk now; a sort of “racial unconscious” that structures the political, social and theoretical struggles over race and racism. Like it or not, debates about multiculturalism, “colour-blindness,” diversity, whiteness, globalization, anti-racism, institutional racism, racist violence, hate speech etc. are in one way or another framed by an underlying politics of post-raciality (n.p.).

Multiculturalism and discourses of postracial inform global art politics. These insights point to the inheritance of a younger generation of black artists. Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi and Mickalene Thomas, on whom this research focuses, are among a younger generation of black women and queer artists who have received particular notoriety in global art markets and cosmopolitan centres. While, to varying degrees, these three artists come out of diverging contexts, the methods they deploy to grapple with aesthetics, the black visual archive, and global political trends are significant to engaging categories of the human and black visual archives.
Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1, “Figuring a Slavery Analytic, Figuring Bafflement” mobilizes racial slavery and diaspora formations as analytic markers that inform the ontology of blackness. Black studies scholars, including Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Sylvia Wynter have noted how transatlantic slavery comes to bear on civil society alongside contemporary racial antagonisms. Literatures of this chapter engage the spectre of racial slavery and diaspora figurations on black cultural production. The latter part of the chapter mobilizes literatures of racial slavery and diaspora to operationalize bafflement. This chapter sets the stage for later discussions on bafflement and contemporary visual art practices.

Chapter 2, “Performing Bafflement: the Everyday, the Erotic, and the Abject,” turns to psychoanalytic imaginations and concepts of the familial, through the abject and the uncanny, to consider black subjectivities. Alongside black studies scholarship, psychoanalysis illuminates a nuanced understanding of desire in black visual archives. Deana Lawson’s Corporeal series foregrounds such concerns. The chapter focuses on how bafflement figures into protocols of race, sexuality, and difference that are used to engage the visual. Deana Lawson’s Corporeal series can be read through bafflement as a bridge between the uncanny and the abject to signify messy black subjectivities and intelligible sites of desire and desiring of black femme bodies.

Chapter 3, “Origins of the Universe and Otherworldly Affects” engages narrative and formalist elements of design in Mickalene Thomas’s work in order to disarm debates on beauty and the sublime. This chapter looks towards the problem of racialized sexuality as a structural position that renders bafflement in experiences of beauty and the sublime. Through citation strategies, Thomas engages modernist painters alongside Black Nationalist aesthetics. Negotiating visual pleasure that reads for bafflement in Thomas’s work ultimately disrupts logics of beauty. The latter part of the chapter considers the sublime and subjectivity in relation to Thomas’s landscapes and interior designs.

Chapter 4, “Pan Global Practices and Frustrating Subjectivities in the work of Zanele Muholi” imagines South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s work through pan-global bafflements. Pan-global considers how black art struggles with personal, political, and nationalist identifications in local and global art contexts. I explicate the baffling ways Muholi’s work circulates and turn to the mega-festivals of Bamako Encounters: Biennial of African

“Conclusion: Towards a Politics of Elsewhere is Nowhere After All” returns to the affective space of bafflement. I consider how bafflement might be placed in time and space. The work of South-Africa-based artist Ayana V. Jackson and debates on black queer futurity assist in apprehending a politics of elsewhere. A politics of elsewhere troubles black embodiment in social death and life.
Chapter 1
Figuring a Slavery Analytic, Figuring Bafflement

In this chapter, I provide an overview of literature concerned with the spectre of racial slavery as context for how black visuality comes into knowing and what is at stake in such a knowing. These literatures provide the context for bafflement. I begin by discussing the implications of transatlantic slavery to contemporary cultural production and material realities. Premised on racial slavery as epochal shift in world history, I discuss the question of the human and black diaspora formations to note how racial slavery foregrounds contemporary racial antagonisms. I am concerned with how blackness comes into formation through slavery, the human, and diaspora. These literatures provide conceptual tools for engaging national identifications, global histories, and modernity; it is with these tools that contemporary black visual art must be encountered. Further, I consider how blackness is mobilized and, subsequently, what such mobilizations means for black visual production. I demonstrate how the overarching racial antagonisms that inform blackness are also sites of possibility.

The second part of this chapter draws on visual culture studies and queer and performance theory, as well as affect studies to operationalize a theory of bafflement. Bafflement functions as a methodology and theoretical scaffolding with which to think about black visual culture. A poetics of bafflement highlights a genealogy of racial slavery in order to think about art in a way that differs from Enlightenment notions of visuality and affect. Bafflement considers seriously how the field of vision is mediated through pre-existing racialized and gendered formations. A poetics of bafflement also grapples with the discursive and the seeable. Through the afterlife of slavery, the affective and the aesthetic, a theory of bafflement operates as a “sense-making” tool with which to mobilize dis-ease, confusion, and frustration in order to think differently through the visual object.

1.1 The Question of the Human, and Towards a Slavery Analytic

The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethno-class . . . conception of the human, Man, which over-represents itself as if it were
the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full
cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.
(Wynter, 2003, p. 260)

As a philosophical and, in turn, ethical stance, humanism emphasizes rational thinking and
affirms perspectives that inform and shape human nature. The origins of humanism are
disputable: Some scholarship traces its lineage to Greek mythos or the revelations of the Garden
of Eden, while other scholarship turns to Confucius or the Renaissance in Europe. Whether
understood as a set of scientific concerns or philosophical debates, the story of humanism can be
framed as a classic story of the emergence of the contemporary nation-state—specifically
Europe’s coming of age—emerging out of the Middle Ages and entering into secularity and
modernity. Humanism, then, is about Europe’s self-narrative and forms the cornerstone of
contemporary liberal understandings of the state.

Several intellectual movements form the basis of humanism. In the Anglophone world,
humanism is rooted in eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The age of Enlightenment focused on
philosophies of reason, analysis, and individualism. Humanism also used science to reform
society and attempted to challenge moral perspectives of the Catholic Church and the authorities
of the time. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (2000) argued that fundamental moral concepts
structured human life. These universal notions of morality informed reason. While an exact
doctrine of humanism cannot easily be pinned down, common themes shaping the philosophy
include ethics and morals, rational thinking as cornerstone for critique, and the notion that
personal liberty and social responsibility are intertwined. Such a narrative of humanism, however
neglects engagement with the terms of its creation—dehumanization, of which slavery and
colonialism are deeply entrenched. In other words, “Europe’s discovery of the Self is
simultaneous with its discovery of Others” (Wynter, 2000, p. 120).

Structuralism emerged in the early 1900s in Europe in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de
Saussure. Later incarnations provided a response to contradictions between the free and the fixed
subject in philosophy and the human sciences. Louis Althusser, for example, coined the term
antihumanism to critique particular Marxist scholarship. Critical of humanism’s focus on the
metaphysical and historically relative, Althusser suggested the self was more readily constructed
through social and structural relations. Alternatively, Althusser, suggested social spaces model
the individual through his or her own ideological concerns (Althusser, 1969, pp. 219–248).

While linguistic concerns previously focused on the historical origins of meaning, structuralism—drawing on de Saussure’s linguistic system—utilized a view of language that provided a set of linguistic meanings and symbolic conventions that preceded the entry of the individual subject to them (Appignanesi, 2004, p. 56).

The influence of 1960s’ poststructuralist movement in Europe saw theorists such as Michel Foucault, a student of Althusser and Jacques Derrida, problematize the human by rejecting fixed conventions of language proposed by earlier structuralist thinkers, for a more focused standpoint on metalinguistics. Foucault viewed foundational aspects of humanism as producing the opposite of emancipatory results through perceived freedoms, which in fact increased the surveillance and disciplining of its subjects. With the rise of technological innovation and the post-humanist turn, which focuses on the liberal subject as not in ownership of the self, one must take heed of how such a conception is based on one formation of humanism. In this case, the liberal subject is always set off against the exclusion of the women, the slave, the colonized (Weheilye, 2014). What then happens with a version of the human that is not in control of itself?

The decolonization struggles of the fifties and sixties produced a body of anticolonial scholarship that has been persistent in responding to the dehumanization of the “Other” in relation to European colonization and imperial rule. This scholarship has sought to push the boundaries of European humanism by focusing on self-identification. Aimé Césaire’s seminal *Discourses of Colonialism* (2001) and Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (2007) are among the critical texts of the time that expose the limits of universal humanism and the terms of freedom and free will as hinging upon ideological and physical control of the disenfranchised. It is here that Césaire points to colonialism’s economic exploitation and denial of the humanity of colonized peoples. Césaire (2001) states,

> The fact is that the so-called European civilization—“Western” civilization—as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “conscience”; and that,
increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive. (p. 31)

Through reason and consciousness, European notions of civilization are superimposed on imperial subjects as a means to justify conquest. Césaire later considers how colonization functions to brutalize the colonizer as well. In this instance, it is important to note that Césaire does not entirely dispense with the work of humanism; rather, he is interested in rethinking the term’s use. Similarly, Fanon (2007) reflects on the postcolonial project “to try to invent a man in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving” (p. 236). It is here that Césaire and Fanon wrestle with what David Scott and Sylvia Wynter foreground as an “embattled humanism”—humanism that challenges itself and at the same time becomes that tool with which to think through (2000, p. 154). The postcolonial project responds to the function of colonialism and imperial rule in shaping particular subjects and, in turn, questions and reinvents the perception in which the colonial subject is formed. These scholars have been instrumental in responding to the limits of universal humanism by noting the centrality of race, gender, and sexualities to notions of the human and the over-determination of the European enlightenment experience. Further, a central purpose of this work is to engage archives of the subaltern in order to think differently about the liberal human. Such debates on the category of the human have focused on racial formations, coloniality, and its influence on the emergence of the modern nation-state. This notion of modernity and the human is intertwined with how bodies are governed, managed, and put under surveillance within the nation-state; more particularly, these notions are intertwined with the rise of the modern nation-state through chattel slavery.

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4 I use postcolonial interactions to mark historical inflections of colonization and societies after colonization and its influence on the proliferation of humanist discourses. Hall (1996) observes that the postcolonial, in this context, highlights uneven shifts in global relation that inform the contemporary conjuncture (p. 246). I do not mean to collapse the social and political legacies of different contexts; rather, I note that the postcolonial does not operate in the same way in all spaces and is hinged on multiple unfolding relations (p. 245). These unfolding relations occur in time and space and are not explicitly linked to a chronology of before and after colonization. Colonialism cannot be viewed as totalitarian but, rather, as a series of power relations that were displaced by “another set of vectors—the transverse linkages between and across nation-state frontiers” (p. 250). I do not spend a considerable amount of time in postcolonial literatures. I do mobilize diaspora later in this chapter and view diaspora as a broader term that includes both postcolonial and non-postcolonial encounters and literatures. Diaspora signals the global and local interrelationships with which a postcolonial process can be read. It is important to note, however, my intentions in mobilizing the term. For more on the ambiguities of the postcolonial see Stuart Hall (1996), “When was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit”, The Postcolonial Question, in I. Chambers and L. Curti, Routledge.
Sylvia Wynter’s writing on coloniality, slavery, and economics are central to contemporary debates in critical humanism. Wynter’s work sets the scene for bafflement by locating affect in discourses of race and gender in the human. Turning to historicity, Wynter argues 1492, in which Christopher Columbus “discovers” the Americas, as an epochal shift in the world order and in turn formation of universal Man. She traces a series of sociohistoric moves that make possible Man and its Other(s) to come into imagination and, in turn, inform contemporary struggles of sexuality and gender, race and ethnicity, class and environment. Man emerges from one way of knowing as the definition of what it means to be human (Wynter, 2003, p. 260). Furthermore, this way of being is inscribed on geographical landscapes. Wynter shows how the juridico-theological rendering of Judeo-Christianity—articulated through inhabitable and uninhabitable landscapes of the time—became the source of geo-politics that Columbus would have to disrupt to fathom a voyage to Asia. Columbus’s conviction that the spread of Christendom could occur through the territorial expansion would impel him to call into question normal paradigms of geography of his time (Wynter, 2003, p. 28). Importantly, Wynter notes this disruption of normative geographical knowledge was exactly the ways of knowing that later justified and propelled enslavement of Africans and the confiscation of indigenous lands.

However, it would be the same dynamic that would also impel him—once he arrived in an antipodes where, for his learned antagonists, there should be no land —to see the non-Christian peoples of his newly found world as “idolaters,” within the terms of the emergent state’s equally juridico-theological categorical models. He therefore saw their lands and original sovereignty as legitimately expropriable (that is, gainable), and they themselves as even enslavable, within the overall logic of the mode of “subjective understanding” that was now to be instituting of the state, as that which he had challenged had been of the feudal order. (Wynter, 1995, p. 28)

This subjective understanding, which Wynter (2003) calls constitutive of the “descriptive statement” of the human (p. 263), becomes the “system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of” the racial other and current struggles with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so forth (p. 260). This rationale and justification of enslavement and confiscation were intrinsically connected to a construction of landscape as being empty and, therefore, embodying an expansion project for the Western
European empire. In turn, this shift participated in the construction of race that Columbus was implicated in and that re-inscribed itself into humanism’s project of categorical man.

Wynter shows how interlocking systems of economics, history, and conquest inform the ways of knowing that shape subjects in the nation. In particular, Wynter illuminates how ways of knowing are deployed in particular historical contexts as means of justification. Bafflement benefits from an engagement with Wynter because her work illuminates the project of knowledge development for the purposes of nation building. Bafflement engages the matrix of operations that inform the “descriptive statement” of the human and holds space for its interpellation in the present day.

Contemporary scholars of black studies have sought to more fully discuss transatlantic slavery—both its role in iterations of Enlightenment humanism and its implications for contemporary racial antagonisms. Scholars (including Hartman, Marriott, McKittrick, Moten, Sexton, and Wilderson) examining the Negro problem argue that contemporary forms of racism and violence must contend with a history of territorial expansion and empire, economic exploitation and transatlantic movement.

Plantation geography and the family romance further inform the human and its antithetical Other. It is here that the forces of relational violence and trauma are deployed as a means to bolster economic wealth, the nation, and subject formation. The plantation, as figure, forms the basis for contemporary racial antagonisms. Fashioning Wynter’s radical humanism through plantation landscapes, Katherine McKittrick (2013) argues that racial histories organize contemporary futures and reveal practices of survival that produce black life. McKittrick (2013) states,

The geographies of slavery, post-slavery, and black dispossession provide opportunities to notice that the right to be human carries in it a history of racial encounters and innovative black diaspora practices that, in fact, spatialize acts of survival. If, as it is claimed, the cemetery “provided a rare setting in which the enslaved could assert their humanity and respect their own culture” within a context of anti-black violence, the burial ground also reveals that in the Americas, it is impossible to delink the built environment, the urban, and blackness. (p. 2)
Highlighting strategies of survival through the cemetery and burial ground, McKittrick (2013) suggests the plantation offers resources with which to think radical humanisms. In one such encounter, McKittrick (2006) draws on Harriet Jacob’s escape to freedom, in the garret of her grandmother’s attic, as an example of survival amidst implausible circumstances. Such encounters negotiate how freedom is imagined differently in and through racial violence.

Wynter’s genealogy provides a guide to contemporary racial antagonisms and critical formations of bafflement. I propose that “a slavery analytic” suggests the importance of conquest, violence, and national formation. As a moment of colonial conquest, grotesque violence, and forced dispersal, 1492 provides a significant historical moment to think contrapuntally about slavery and colonialism, freedom and unfreedom, human and other. A slavery analytic brings together these fraught intimacies. Bafflement, then, is located in fraught intimacies of slavery and colonialism. To figure bafflement in such a context is to pay attention to the formation of nation through violence and to acknowledge its proliferation in present-day antagonisms.

Orlando Patterson (1982) first argues that the link between social death and slavery is inherent in enslavement process as, after capture, the enslaved submit to powerlessness through the loss of identities. Such violence articulates itself as a mode of regulation; this linkage marks some of the ways the enslaved do not have control over their subjecthood. In her examination of transatlantic slavery, Saidiya Hartman (2007) links such a social death to racial logics that, in turn, order contemporary racial antagonisms. She states,

I too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is an ongoing crisis of citizenship. Questions first posed in 1773 about the disparity between “the sublime ideal of freedom” and the “facts of blackness” are uncannily relevant today. (p. 133)

Hartman (2007) extrapolates transatlantic logic as that which brings forth exclusion to the nation, and, in turn, contemporary forms of citizenship. For the plantation, the spectacles of masterly pleasure and brutality and of property and rights-less-ness, as well as the attendant paternalistic sentiments go hand in hand with forming the slave not only outside a system of citizenship but also outside the universal human. This act happens simultaneously through the construction of slave as antithetical to citizen and human. Who and what can be free hinges on the slave/the black/the nigger as that constitutive of unfree.
David Marriott and Fred Moten offer significant contribution in thinking visuality, audibility, and racial slavery within the context of contemporary black subjectivity formations. Visualities of blackness are ideologically based and inform governing strategies of populations within the nation, both on the psychic and the visual level. Marriott is interested in the linkage between spectrality and the visible, for it is racial slavery that haunts the very existence of black subjectivities, as they are represented, conceived of, and articulated in media and elsewhere. He states, “In particular, the occult presence of racial slavery, nowhere but nevertheless everywhere, a dead time which need arrives and does not stop arriving, as though by arriving it never happened until it happens again, then it never happened” (Marriott 2007, pg. xxi). Similarly, Avery Gordon (2008) discusses “ghostly matters,” in which the historical haunts everyday formations of self and relation (p. 23). Like a ghost, an opaque presence that leaves trace and residue, the matter of racial slavery becomes a fragment site of trace that informs contemporary black life (Gordon, 2008; Marriott, 2000, 2007). What might be, for Marriott, a dismal and melancholic articulation (2007, pp. xx-xxi) that is afro-pessimistic in nature, is, for Fred Moten, a question of possibility.

Moten (2008) asks to further interrogate the question of freedom and blackness. By suggesting blackness as a site of stealth possibility—one that disrupts normative logics of freedom—Moten means to disrupt the law of the land and engage the “law” of the outlawed. In this instance, Moten’s central preoccupation is to make an argument for the possibility of black social life and (pun intended) a case for blackness. Organized in three parts, Moten’s (2008) The Case of Blackness opens with a series of provocations. The second section of the paper examines a transcript of discussions between musicians and visual artists Ad Reinhardt and Cecil Taylor, Albert Ammons and Piet Mondrian, on the socio-political context and possibility of the colour black. The final section turns more closely to Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth and the nearness and distance of pathology of and in the colonized, even as a site of fugitive movement (stealing away, unconscious resistance). Indeed, Moten and others (including Hartman, Marriott, and Wilderson) engage this question of black social life in relation to the afro-pessimist. My interest in a consideration of the terms used to engage racial slavery and its contemporary

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5 By “afro-pessimism” I am referencing Frank Wilderson’s loosely turned theory of a black ontology that is always linked to a series of racial antagonisms of violence, coercion, and death.
aftermath is their significance in understanding the instrumental role visuality, and specifically black visuality, may play in noting and addressing what is at stake when imagining other possibilities for the figure of the human. Additionally, my interest in outlining the work of scholars in and through afro-pessimism and black optimism is not to suggest the importance of one particular approach over the other, but rather to outline how these debates in black studies are indeed much more messy than conceptual camps of discourse.

The black-studies project has always been a rebellious endeavour, one that culls for what is at stake in the human and, subsequently, what it at stake in thinking the impossible possible. Bafflement requires these literatures as the black-studies project contextualizes how a radical politics can be forged despite violence. Wynter’s complex genealogy reads for inflections of disease that can disarm treacherous conceptions of the human. Debates on the social death and life of blackness highlight what is at stake in theorizing blackness as impossible possibility. Racial slavery, as an occult haunting of the present and a law of the outlawed, provides the context with which to think about radical possibility of blackness and, in turn, bafflement. Hartman and Moten’s quotes guide both this section and a call to bafflement: They speak about law and moral codes and connect to claims to the nation, while simultaneously asking one to think beyond the bounds of nation states, beyond the bounds of what is fathomably to be black. Yet, they centralize racial slavery as a precursory context in which to think the impossible.

1.1.1 Uses of Diaspora and Its Socio-Political Spaces

To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art. (Brand, 2001, p.19)

Diaspora, then, is tough precisely because it cuts across existing maps, all the while recognizing how these maps are constituting diaspora itself; thus, we are encouraged to consider that the material and imaginative geographies of diaspora are: boundary-less, beyond boundary, liminal, limitless, global, unfinished, dispersed, migratory, underwater, underground, “thrown to the four winds.” (McKittrick, 2007, p. 17)
The epigraphs that begin this section draw attention to the challenges of providing a lineage of black diaspora, its applications and formations, precisely because of its liminality. How does one introduce the intellectual, analytical, and creative projects of black diaspora? These present a series of lineages, yet black diaspora formations are themselves a fiction of empire and self-creation, formed through unfinished geographies. Diaspora and transnationalism provide further context for the development of a theory of bafflement. The previous discussion on racial slavery and the human has located bafflement in the violence(s) that frame discourses of blackness. Diaspora mobilizes the intimacies of violence through social, economic, and cultural creation, which are equally important to a discussion of blackness and visual art.

In the decades following World War II, diaspora begins to appear in black literary traditions. Prior to its emergence, artists and intellectuals in the nineteenth century (such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Martin Delany, and Pauline Hopkins) and in the twentieth century (including W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Tiemoko Garan Koyaté) had engaged with themes of internationalism as a means to point to the circuits of people, ideas, and cultural knowledge (Edwards, 2001, p. 45–46). Diaspora has been used globally as a way to define commonalities among groups of people of African descent. Its genealogy has included uses of internationalism to point to the movements of blacks and to the emergence of hard-won institutional and epistemological gains in the United States academic sector (Henderson, 1996; Lubiano, 1996; Wynter, 1992); and to modes of theorizing populist racism in Britain (Gilroy, Hall). Diaspora has proven to be a fruitful critique for scholars (such as Henderson, Kelly, and McKittrick) of race, migration, and transnationalism as well as a means to theorizing the black world and how it informs histories of the West. In “The Uses of Diaspora”, Brent Hayes Edwards (2001) chronicles the emergence of black diaspora to interrogate its use in the contemporary moment. From this perspective, he notes an important clarification in the epistemological work it is said to do. Edwards’s purpose is not to unearth the “originating” (p. 53) usages of the term, but to ask why it becomes necessary at a certain historical moment to employ diaspora in black intellectual work and to mark how discourses of diaspora become important during the same period in which a notion of “mobilized diaspora” takes shape (p. 56). Nevertheless, the article chronicles diaspora and locates diaspora’s initial incarnation in the development of internationalism, through a distinction between pan-African and Pan-African movements and a discussion on Stuart Hall’s remix of articulation. Edwards concludes by arguing the usefulness of décalage.
George Shepperson’s (1962) genealogy of diaspora begins with a differentiation between the uses of Pan-Africanism (explicitly connected to the Pan-African Congress of the 1900s) and pan-Africanism (which is not a clearly recognizable movement with a singular nucleus, but rather an ephemeral term denoting various groups and multiplicities of voices). St. Clair Drake (1966), who has long theorized about the term, misses the nuances of Shepperson’s differentiation as a multi-vocal site of cultural creation. Focusing mostly on the phenotypic parameters of African Diaspora, St. Clair Drake offers a reductionist response to the cultural sector, rather than taking seriously Shepperson’s use of diaspora to theorize culture and politics transnationally (Edwards, 2001, p. 55).

The institutionalization of blacks studies in the US Academy of the 1960s and 1970s points to further uses of diaspora. As intervention into Western hegemony over knowledge production, diaspora in the academy links knowledge production and the nation. In this way, diaspora is incorporated into many of the mission statements of black studies departments. These strategies, however, were not always congruent with Shepperson’s earlier work on multi-vocality of pan-Africanism and difference. Edwards (2001) states, “The discourse of diaspora, in other words, is both enabling to black studies, in the services of such an ‘intervention,’ and inherently a risk, in that it can fall back into either racial essentialism or American Vanguardism” (p. 57).

The black studies project marked a rupture within the United States’ academic discourse and greatly influenced how culture, society, politics, and experience emerged. While the black cultural studies project in Europe of the 1980s and early 1990s exposed some of the challenges of uneven economic, social, and cultural development, particularly in the context of British experience, Mae G. Henderson (1996), Wahneema Lubiano (1996), and Sylvia Wynter (1992) discuss the complexities of histories of institutional intervention and internationalization in discourses of diaspora. These thinkers express concern around the hard-won gains of black studies in the United States and the challenges of importing British cultural studies. Henderson (1996) highlights institutional and ideological concerns and asks, what space will black cultural studies occupy in the institution and how will the specificity of genealogy of US-based black intellectual thought on cultural and politics inform such a turn (p. 63)?

What I am arguing is that the narrative we construct of the genealogy of cultural studies in the United States must create a place for black studies as a scholarly
and political enterprise that transforms the university into a space of contestation and negotiation over the production and construction of knowledge. (Henderson, 1996, p. 66)

Henderson’s admirable concern warns against the loss of genealogical inflections of US-based black-studies scholarship at the expense of a turn to cultural studies.  

Within the British academy, cultural studies in the 1980s and early 1990s required thinking about race and diaspora. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, in part through the publication of The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racisms in ’70s Britain (1982), was instrumental in marking a “turn to race” as a “turn to diaspora,” particularly as these phenomena responded to the Englishness and nationalism implied in Thatcherian politics (Edwards 2001, p. 57). Cultural identity is based on difference and hybridity; in “Race, Articulation and Societies Structures in Dominance,” Hall (1980) theorizes difference in global capitalist modes of production. He returns to Marxist articulation and Althusser’s social formation in relation to difference, describing articulation as

a metaphor used to “indicate relations of linkage and affectivity between different levels of all sorts of things” . . . [T]hese things need to be linked because though connected they are not the same. The unity that they form is not one of an identity. . . . The unity formed by this combination of articulation, is always necessarily a “complex structure”: a structure in which things are related as much through their difference as through their similarities. (Hall, 1980, p. 325)

Articulation not only occurs through systems of relation but through systems of relation that are structured through dominance itself. Hall’s (1980) central premise is that through systems of articulation, social formation becomes a complex process that cannot be distilled to one element

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6 Bearing in mind Henderson’s critique, the legacy of black scholarship in the US academy and, in particular, in canonical texts instrumental to its formation, are already diasporic. Examples include: Harriet Tubman’s movement through North America via the Underground Railroad, the Pan-Africanist movements with which Shepperson points to and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The UNIA possessed political links to the US and Canada and attempted to circulate goods and people through an “African global economy.” Further, W.E.B. DuBois’s presence with the Niagara Movement of 1905 took place in Canada. His later political concerns with Ghana, as a nation for blacks, mark further transnational concerns, which illuminate how his own scholarship shifted in age.
(e.g., Marx’s articulation cannot be reduced to the economic). Further, Hall believes a theory of articulation provides some explanation of forms of racism at social, political, and ideological levels (p. 322).

Diaspora, as a term, arrives explicitly in cultural studies with Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, in which Gilroy (1987) negotiates the precarity of proliferating black and nationalist discourses. He proposes black internationalism and resistance to colonial practices as actively remaking blackness in the context of British nationalism. Gilroy’s (1993) later use of diaspora, through the “Black Atlantic,” stands in for a more complex set of genealogies and interventions. The black Atlantic meditates on new-world black subjectivities and their position in relation to European modernity. Gilroy resists neat categories of understanding black cultural form as marginal and derived from dominant national cultures (e.g., Anglo-American and Anglo-African), choosing to assert that black thinkers and artists have regularly been involved in transnational practices precluding fixed associations with a nation of origin. He states,

> The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constrains of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national political cultures and nation states in America, the Caribbean and Europe. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19)

The challenges of such a term point to the ways *black Atlantic* usurps space for diaspora and its cosmopolitan locale; further, Edwards (2001) notes the term imposes a hemispheric, geographical specificity and explicit racial context, which limit the scope of what such a term really seeks to engage (p. 62). Yet, Gilroy (1993) reminds us that thinkers and artists (such as Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, C.L.R. James, Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, and Anna Julia Cooper) who are regularly evoked in the black studies cannon are neglected for their diaspora
political views, motivations, and transnational movements.\(^7\) Rinaldo Walcott reminds us, “the question of genealogy is always a question fraught with difficulty. Any genealogy always seems to drag with it the questions of origins” (Walcott, 2003b, p. 108). These intra- and cross-disciplinary debates warn that the most well-intentioned projects to decolonize the academy, decentre meta-narratives (e.g., US exceptionalism), and dismantle Eurocentric claims still struggle and often recreate the very frameworks they seek to dismantle.

The emergence of diaspora into black studies and cultural studies signals overlapping and diverging contexts that are important to conceptualizing the transnational subject. The challenges of genealogy are apparent and highlight the tenuous process of world making in the midst of oppressions. Bafflement necessitates a struggle over diaspora in order to think about the terms of cultural creation as debatable and fraught.

1.1.1.1 Entering Lists: Misappropriations, Globalization, and Black/Queer/Diaspora

Brent Edwards (2001) returns to Hall’s articulation to propose his own conceptualization of diaspora in décalage (p. 65). Linguistically, the French term *décalage* resists translation to English. Through its non/translation as a marked gap, discrepancy, time lag, Edwards theorizes *décalage* to read for the unevenness in African diaspora. Categories of difference are important to the uses of black diaspora and provide further context for a theory of bafflement that can account for multiple subjectivities. Such unevenness in diaspora is fraught with difficulties, not just of origin, but also of how gender, sexuality, and broader transnational practices come to bear on diaspora conceptions.

Disrupting the categorization of diaspora, Katherine McKittrick asks “What are the politics of mapping the black diaspora and how it is done?” (2007, p. 16). McKittrick takes issue with patriarchal formation of diaspora and how the act of historicity maintains positivist and exclusionary practices, even when such practices name the presence of whiteness and

\(^7\) Black Queer Studies Conference in the Millennium (2000), Decolonizing the Academy: African Diaspora Studies conference (2003) and State of Black Studies: Past, Present, Futures at Yale University (2011), among others, have brought together scholars from disciplines within African American, Africana, and black cultural studies departments across the US to consider what is at stake in discourses of blackness particularly when we neglect their transnational trajectories.
colonialism. In practice, the production of special catalogues, lists, and encyclopedias emphasize the positivist determination of marking, labelling, and classifying information while shoring up disciplinary boundaries. McKittrick states, “The geo-politics of the diaspora might be framed to incite the jurisdiction and regulation of diaspora-lands and its diaspora-citizens even though diaspora, ideally, works to undo this jurisdiction and regulation” (p. 15). Questioning where black women come to bear on diaspora, she reminds that articulations of diaspora by the founding fathers of the genre offer only partial viewpoints of diaspora politics. She continues,

Diaspora, then, is tough precisely because it cuts across existing maps, all the while recognizing how these maps are constituting diaspora itself; thus we are encouraged to consider that the material and imaginative geographies of diaspora are: boundary-less, beyond a boundary, liminal, limitless, global, unfinished, dispersed, migratory, underwater, underground, “thrown to the four winds.” (McKittrick, 2007, p. 17)

Edwards’s use of décalage, Hall’s articulation of the term, and McKittrick’s entering into the list all serve to illuminate the challenge of diaspora, which must not form closures and shore up disciplinary boundaries. Subsequently, theories of diaspora, particularly in the black cultural studies tradition, have been instrumental in moving diaspora away from nationalist projects located in homeland, exile, and return; conversely, and dangerously, critiques of nation and race can misappropriate diaspora to function alongside “backward-looking concepts of diaspora” that are complicit with Western imperial and nationalist projects (Hall, 1990a, pp. 235). While diaspora, in response to nationalist discourses, posits the disavowed other to the nation, the nation can also dangerously coopt diaspora’s critiques into its universalizing logics. One example of this is the patriarchal underpinnings of diaspora, whether marked through a return to homeland or a disavowal of black-women geographies. Black feminist and postcolonial scholars concerned with nation, empire, and subjectivity have been instrumental in pointing to nationalist

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8 McKittrick (2007) wrote “I Enter the Lists...Diaspora Catalogues: the List, the Unbearable Territory and Tormented Chronologies” while also constructing an encyclopedia entry on diaspora for The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2009). McKittrick’s interventions on the uses of diaspora are ideologically and methodologically based. She is interested in “reimagining the spatial politics of black diaspora” (p. 17) and throws into disarray style and formal practice in academic writing to disrupt the positivist cataloguing that underpins forms of academic writing. By structuring “I Enter the Lists” in three sections that can be read non-linearly, McKittrick frames her ideological concerns of diaspora as cutting across existing maps (p. 17).
discourses that engage particular articulations of woman to make patriarchal claims to homeland, the nation, and counter discourses of belonging. Such scholarship has been instrumental in showing how female corporality under nationalism is simultaneously an object of management, procurement, and reproduction and a site of surveillance and control (Alexander, 2005; Keeling, 2007; Lorde, 1984; Stephens, 2005; Wright, 2004).

In this logic, black-female corporality holds a particularly precarious space. Michelle M. Wright asserts the use of tropes such as “other from without” (Hegel) and “outsider within” (Jefferson) to justify European expansion. For German philosopher Hegel, the Negro occupies the space of other from without, posing an issue for German polity while also representing a key factor to its national expansion and African progress (Wright, 2004, p. 14). Similarly, Thomas Jefferson constructs an other from within to position American blacks as foreign to the nation (Wright, 2004, p. 16). Wright makes two central arguments. Firstly, categories of whiteness are deployed to justify colonialism and enslavement, while defining purity, domesticity, and a divine ability to manage land. Blackness, as the antithesis to the human and therefore citizen, occupies the site of criminality and violence. Lynching mythology, which indicates different recourses for the rape and pillage of white women than for that of black women, provide one exemplar of how race factors into the terms of the citizen (Hartman, 1997; Wells). Secondly, counterdiscourses by black intellectuals that attempt to disrupt blackness as antithetical to whiteness, often rely on gendered strategies and tenuous strategies that suture black respectability with national incorporation. Yet the production of these counterdiscourses reside in black male subjectivity and focus on the particularities of their position and how they view the relationship of black to the West; their subjects are already always gendered as male (Wright, 2004, p. 21).

Gayatri Gopinath’s Impossible Desires: Queer Diaspora and South Asian Public Culture (2005) formulates “queer diaspora space” to unsettle gender and sexual ideologies that bolster nationalist diaspora practices and doubly undercut a dependency on genealogical and

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9 Wright turns to the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Frantz Fanon to note how masculinist self-determination often relies on gendered language and the erasure of black women to argue for inclusion into the nation.
heteronormative reproductive logics to the nation (p. 10). Queer diaspora space, then, provides an opportunity for queer theorizing that leans on diaspora to engage with gender and sexuality. Queer diaspora space is productive: Firstly, it disentangles diaspora from nationalism and grapples with how global processes shape and transform people in the diaspora. Secondly, queering diaspora exposes desires, practices, and subjectivities that are unimaginable in conventional diaspora practices. By challenging nationalist ideologies, queer diaspora is able to expose impure, nonreproductive ideas of diaspora. Simultaneously diaspora bears on queerness, particularly through its ability to think through race, colonialism, slavery, migration, and globalization.

Gopinath (2005) further argues that in order to think diaspora outside of patriarchy, globalization and capitalist consumption must be considered alongside histories of colonialism and slavery in the making of the nation-state. A critique of the nationalist discourses of diaspora must also consider how globalization through capital are gendered and sexualized. While Gopinath points to feminist theorizing on nationalism and the way it figures the woman as an apparatus with which masculine nationalist projects take shape, she also notes the limits of such scholarship in considering heteronormativity in these same spheres of thought. Where gender and sexuality inform nationalist projects, they also influence how globalization is experienced. Drawing on how traditionally gendered private spaces, such as the immigrant home, transforms, exploits, and shapes global gendered arrangements, less attention has been given to how global processes inform discourses of sexuality and how this intersects with diaspora. Gopinath suggests queer diaspora might engage such questions.

Black queer theory enhances discourses of diaspora, black public cultures, internationalism, and visual culture. While not dealing directly with diaspora, Roderick Ferguson (2004) identifies an urgent need for a “queer of color critique”—a methodology that is not beholden to identitarian

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10 Gopinath (2005) wrote: “The critical framework of a specifically queer diaspora then, may begin to unsettle the way in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand and processes of globalization on the other. . . . This framework ‘queers’ the concept of diaspora by unmasking and undercutting its dependence on a genealogical implicit heteronormative reproductive logic” (p.10).

11 Gopinath deploys Jenny Sharpe’s astute critique of Gilroy as example of the pitfalls of globalization and capitalism on theorizing diaspora. The challenges of black Atlantic sensibilities arise in locating the cosmopolitan centre as space for its formation. These First-World transnational spaces (e.g. London, New York, Paris), deployed by Gilroy, must take heed of the degree to which the black Atlantic is mapped through and by globalization (p. 9).
politics yet, animates black/queer sensibilities. A queer of colour critique is deeply invested in how prior and current disciplinary configurations within humanities and social sciences set parameters through which black/queer/diaspora lives come to be assessed and knowable.

Jafari Allen (2012) furthers the challenges of conceiving of diaspora against nationalist and globalizing processes by mobilizing black/queer/diaspora through its conjunctural frame. Noting contradiction of varying constellations of work, Allen puts to use the ‘/’ stylistic form to draw sharp individualized focus to how black, queer, diaspora can simultaneously conjoin with each other and push each other away (p. 217). He states,

> By conjunctural moments, I mean to index the temporal space in which the articulation (or accretion or collision) of sometimes related and other times opposing or unrelated discourses, practices, or trajectories reshape, reimagine, or alter our view of the present. At conjectural moments ‘new’ ideas and practices emerge and take on added significance precisely because of this articulation or perhaps novel re-articulation, or ‘mash-up’). The conjectural moment I am meditating on here, for example, is constituted not only by the maturation of black and queer of color studies literatures and the current existential crisis of queer studies but also by the recognition of the presence of the transnational in every moment, even ‘at home’ and the rapidity of popular forms of (uneven) global exchange. (Allen, 2012, p. 214)

Such frameworks do not position new disciplinary concerns in opposition to preexisting ones. Instead, conjunctural moments provide the act of theorization within the mash-up and through overlapping, converging and, at times, contradictory formulations. A theory of bafflement requires black diaspora that is unhinged from normative formations. Scholarship at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality provides a necessary critique of the patriarchal formations of diaspora and locates transnational encounters in peculiar places. A return to queer-of-colour critique and black/queer/diaspora conceives of the importance of developing a reading practice that accounts for social formation in and through systems of domination and, simultaneously, in how black-studies scholarship generates possibility. Thinking regarding queer-of-colour critique and black/queer/diaspora must continue to acknowledge the transnational and translocal concerns embedded in its frameworks. Bafflement, contextualized
through black/queer/diaspora praxis, reveals latent and overlooked experiences and extends the reach of Wynterian genealogies of the human to rupture its descriptive statement.

1.1.1.2 Black/Queer/Diaspora Analytics and What’s “Black” in Contemporary Black Visual Art Now?

How does a diaspora analytic come to bear on global practices of black cultural production? In what ways does black/queer/diaspora inform the contemporary climate in which particular black visual artists come to circulate? Furthermore, in what ways do cultural producers move through black-diaspora discourses? With these questions in mind, I turn to theorize diaspora in relation to art history and visual culture. I look specifically at the postmodern moment, post-black art and the mobilization of Afropolitanism as historical sites and curatorial strategies emerging after the 1990s. I am particularly interested in how these terms mark trajectories of black art and culture and how these terms contextualize bafflement in an era of globalization.

In 1991, during a conference on “Black Popular Culture” held at the Dias Center for Arts in partnership with the Studio Museum of Harlem New York (SMH), Stuart Hall (1998) asked the question, what is the “black” in black popular culture? He argues that a return to the black in black popular culture requires thinking outside of binary formations of an us (e.g., African American and/or African diaspora art) versus them (e.g., European art) narrative in order to conceive of modes of cultural production, through global postmodernism, as being without guarantees. Hall draws on examples that inform the creation of “popular” art through differentiations in high and low culture, Balkanian carnivalesques, and a hesitancy to use global postmodernism under the guise of producing difference without a difference; these examples inform his argument that the cultural movement of the 1990s must imagine black cultural repertoires as dialogical and representative of a struggle of politics. Hall’s purpose is to think about new ways of making change and to reanimate black popular culture as one that is always a

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12 Hall, among others, highlights the evacuation of accountability by European art forms to acknowledge how Western traditions in the New World rely and are often indebted to African art forms. To this point, Hall notes hesitancy in the application of global postmodernism, particularly because of the evacuation of accountability. Attuning to the work of diaspora, its transnational implications, and its rise in popularity during a turn to globalization, Robin G. Kelley notes a similar argument in the construction of African diaspora more broadly. He writes: “The making of the African diaspora was as much a product of ‘the West’ as it was of internal developments in Africa and the Americas. At the same time racial capitalism, imperialism and colonialism—the key forces responsible for creating the modern African diaspora—could not shape African culture(s) without altering Western culture” (Kelley, 2004, p. 41).
source of hybridization and creation through partial synchronizations. Through recognition of hybridization and relation, one can fully engage with diaspora aesthetic practices. In this telling, Hall highlights genealogical moves, as identified by Cornel West, that mark a turn in the present conjuncture: the fall of European art and culture as the barometer, the introduction of America as a world power, and the decolonization of the Global South (West, 1990). Hall posits three additional ambiguities to Cornel West’s insights on the postmodern turn: the continued ambivalence of the United States to European high art and culture, the emergence (or perhaps renewed focus) on globalization, and the global cross-flows of ideas, objects, and people. Finally, Hall describes the postmodern moment as carrying deep interest in difference. Hall and West, among other critical race and visual culture scholars of the time, highlight a change in the way art and culture circulates. Hall’s popular culture, as hybridized form, signals bafflement’s articulation of aesthetic creation and response as a continued engagement with dialogic differentiation. This differentiation requires constant engagement with the historical moment. The interest in difference reflects the current moment, where diversity is no longer an anomaly. However, black artists must negotiate visibility, competing discourses of modernity, and expectations of cultural production.

When discussing post-black, I do not mean post race. I am not suggesting a moment can exist in which we are post race, or after racism. Post race requires the erasure and dismissal of racial antagonisms and difference more broadly, as a marker that structures social formations. As the following section will note, post-black has multiple meanings and these meaning are rooted in discourses of blackness as a marker of difference and political identification. In 1991, historian and cultural critic Robert Farris Thompson first used the term post-black to critique postmodernity. Thompson (1991) notes:

> A retelling of Modernism to show how it predicts the triumphs of current sequences would reveal that the Other is your neighbor that—black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago. Why use the word “Post-Modern” when it may also mean “postblack”? (p. 91)

Thompson (1991) highlights a broader concern that informs scholarship on visual modernism: There are temporal and spatial concerns regarding periodization of the modern and postmodern that must be taken into account and new conceptions of modernist art that, simultaneously, need
to be considered. To this end, Thompson argues for the preservation of race consciousness in art in order to redress omissions within historical legacies of modernism. To use the word *postmodern* was to use the word *post-black*. Thompson asserts that a rewriting of modernism must account for the impact of blackness (p. 91). Post-black art makes its curatorial debut in 2001 and has continued to spur debate. Thelma Golden introduces this idea in *Freestyle* (2001) an exhibition surveying emerging black artists curated by Golden and Christine Y. Kim for the Studio Museum of Harlem. Golden contextualizes the term:

> Post-black was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for discourses that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about “black art” ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time. . . . It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. (Golden & Walker, 2001, p. 14)

In contrast to Thompson’s articulation of post-black as strategy to rewrite modernity and the postmodern, Golden resurrects the notion of black art and blackness:

> There is no single way to think about it. I am interested in its diversity and in bringing multiculturalism to the mainstream. I’ve become interested in younger black artists who are steeped in the postmodern discourse about blackness but do not necessarily put it first. (Hackett, 2003, n.p.)

Years later, Golden reflects on post-black art in a lecture at Tate Modern in 2009. In this reflection, Golden notes the insistence of *black* in post-black. In this way a political dimension to post-black is maintained. Here, a politics of identification must continue to overcome social formations that adhere to black subjects in order to combat racism.

Valerie Cassel Oliver (2005) juxtaposes W. E. B. Du Bois’s sensibilities of double consciousness with a lineage of post-black within the context of the United States. Oliver notes that the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the inflections of blackness as a self-empowering term inherited in the 80s and 90s—particularly as articulated through music such as NWA and Public
Enemy—and the shifting language—from Negro to the use of a hyphen in African-American—all mark historical milestones in which post-black informs contemporary conceptual art.\textsuperscript{13} To this end, Oliver argues how younger generations of artists, through influences in musical strategies, produce aesthetic formations that reflect back on Du Boisian double consciousness. It is through these sensibilities, Oliver argues, that a resurrection of blackness has emerged. In this way, Nana Adusei-Poku (2012) suggests, “Post black artists use the categories of race and Blackness but deconstruct them, which moves the question of race somehow out of the center of the reading—this practice of deconstruction is characterized by a visual disobedience” (n.p.).\textsuperscript{14} Importantly, Adusei-Poku notes that Golden and Oliver’s mobilization of post-black relies on the spatial and temporal contexts of the United States and makes little reference to an inclusion of black diaspora outside of North America. I concur and note that, despite an explicit omission of the broader contexts with which post-black emerges in Golden’s narration, post-black does, in fact, rely on black diaspora formations. Further, this fact is present when reading post-black art contrapuntally with conversations on contemporary African art that occurred simultaneously within the archives of post-black art. Finally, by way of Hall’s provocation of black in the conjunctural moment, I consider what is the black in contemporary black visual art, now?

The Studio Museum of Harlem’s emerging-artist series marks a decidedly diaspora turn. This is most apparent in Flow (2008), the third installation of the series, which features African artists. Golden, in the “Director’s Foreword,” remarks on a self-reflective shift in which the Studio Museum begins to use “artists of African descent” as a means to mark the global nature of the black world (2008, pp. 16–17). While often warranting further description, Golden notes how this intention of open and inclusive terminology required continued struggle with “diaspora.” For Golden, Flow brings into the purview this struggle, by exploring artists born in Africa, artists of

\textsuperscript{13} Oliver’s reflections are presented as part of the catalogue for Houston Contemporary Art Museum on contemporary African American conceptual art. Oliver, Valerie C. 2005. \textit{Black Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since the 1970’s}. Houston: Contemporary Art Museum.

African descent, African artists working on the continent, African artists working outside the continent, all of the above, or none of the above (pp. 16–17). It is through this struggle—and through what Christine Y. Kim (2008) notes as a persistent turn from *Frequency* (2005), in which artists began to record three or more countries of origin, beginning with African nations—that diaspora and internationalism enter Studio Museum’s lexicon of exhibitions.

Kim (2008) further expounds on the artists of *Flow* as being decidedly post-black, much like the artists presented in *Frequency* and *Freestyle*. Though the artists of *Frequency* and *Freestyle* were based in the United States, Kim notes, “Its participants were decidedly global, with trans-, intra- and multi-cultural concerns, diasporic identifications and particular attention to the various contradictions of a so called ‘black’ art practice” (pp. 18–19). It is in this insight that Kim rewrites the omission of diaspora analytic onto the Studio Museum’s emerging-artist series. Indeed, many of the artists featured in *Frequency* and *Freestyle* utilize cultural production across the Atlantic.15 My intention in reading towards diaspora in the work of the Studio Museum of Harlem is not to claim naïveté to the work of US exceptionalism and omissions of diaspora. Rather, I intend to re-narrativize a US-based art and cultural institution as one already premised on diaspora, even when it struggles to acknowledge such a fate.16 Rinaldo Walcott (2009) warns that, within the postmodern moment, aspects of the nation-state continue to proliferate, and art and cultural institutions do not reside outside of these limitations. For this reason he notes, the possibilities and limits of theorizing diaspora as a way to pose the question of what is at stake in the postmodern, transglobal world, when some aspects of the nation-state remain firmly in place for the unruly, resistance of citizens located on the inside/outside axis of a given nation. (Walcott, 2009, p. 33)

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15 Among the artists of *Freestyle* were Kori Newkirk, Laylah Ali, Eric Wesley, Senam Okudzeto, David McKenzie, Susan Smith-Pinelo, Sanford Biggers, Louis Cameron, Deborah Grant, Rashid Johnson, Arnold Kemp, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, and Jennie C. Jones. Several artists consider their work embedded in transnational formations that suggest black diaspora approaches. Some of these artists, including Senam Okudzeto and Julie Mehretu, present contact between diaspora strategies and Afropolitanism, even when SMH did not narrate the show as such.

16 Further exhibitions grappled with some of the same questions: *Africans in America: The New Beat of Afropolitans* took place at the Houston Museum of African American Culture (September 2011). *Figures and Fiction: Contemporary South African Photography* was presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum (June 2011).
Kim’s (2008) curatorial description then makes a move to bring discussion of African artists into conversation with the museum’s focus on black art, by turning to the Afropolitan as a phenomenon rooted in a willingness to critique and celebrate Africa, while refusing to oversimplify its meaning (p. 18). The concept was first discussed in an article by Taiye Tuakli-Wosooru (2006) and later taken up by Achille Mbembe (Mbembe, 2007). Tuakli-Wosooru’s article focuses on the Afropolitan as a new generation of African emigrants to Western spheres (Canada, Britain, and United States, as well as other post-cold-war countries) and their children who claim multiple loci of origin. Within this definition are inflections of upward mobility, in which the cosmopolitan spaces of the West mark the site of social, occupational, and cultural articulation of where the Afropolitan resides and comes to bear influence. Through multiple landscapes, the Afropolitan negotiates belonging and becoming through national, racial, and cultural dimensions. Takli-Wosooru states, “While our parents can claim one country as home, we must define our relationship to the place we live; how British or American we are (or act) is in part a matter of affect” (2006, pp.8–10). Achille Mbembe further expounds on Afropolitanism:

> Awareness in the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativization of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seems to be opposites—it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term, “Afropolitanism.” (2007, p. 28)

More broadly, Afropolitanism is a particular way of being in the world that takes into consideration worlds in movement, transnational cultures within Africa and its elsewhere(s), and a political stance in relation to nation, race, and issues of difference. These encounters announce forms of precolonial African modernities that have yet to be taken into account in contemporary creativity (p. 27). Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) turn to the metropolis as a space with which to destabilize common-sense interpretations of Africa and to engage new archives

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17 Mbembe writes this chapter in relation to *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* that takes place in Johannesburg South Africa in 2007. He spends a considerable amount of time explicating the ways in which worlds in movement and immersion provide reading strategies of a culture of movement that both predates colonialism and disrupts colonialism’s strategy to erect borders (p. 26–27).
and rethink old ones.\(^{18}\) Rethinking the archive, the continent can be understood as a space constantly in flux—one that is translocal and a nexus of entry and exit. Writing Africa from the metropolis, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) revisit the challenge of the postmodern archive and its inability to narrate Africa. Through normative strands of discourse (e.g., functionalism, neoliberalism, and Marxist political economy) and a refusal to recognize knowledge as contingent on other knowledges, postmodern archives replicate Africa as existing outside of modernity (p. 350).

The overlapping and diverging articulations of post-black art and Afropolitanism are framed against the backdrop of globalization and neoliberalism. In this way the nation is repurposed. Multiculturalism, the “war on terror” and rising Islamophobia, and increased anti-immigrant sentiments are globally juxtaposed against new forms of cross-flow of people, while goods and ideas continue to produce tenuous religious, economic, and political technologies of control. Heightened immigration policies that construct borders around the correct kind of immigrant while inhibiting contemporary forms of migration are examples that Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) highlight to inform the contemporary moment.

Having explored both post-black art and Afropolitanism as concepts emerging through cultural and political discourses, I return to a repurposing of Hall’s question, what is the “black” in contemporary black visual art now? Thompson’s (1991) critique of postmodernism inability to acknowledge cross flows of art and culture remain central here. To Thompson, post-black is marked by translocal strategies. Post-black and Afropolitan share in a critical impulse to critique and renarrate postmodernism; the means with which this occurs, in addition to transnational location, requires putting into practice a critique of neoliberalism and a culture of consumption. I have outlined some examples of the current conjuncture that form parameters in which transnational black art is formed.

\(^{18}\) Mbembe and Nuttall write, “In attempt to overturn predominant readings of Africa, we need to identify, sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse that defamiliarizes common sense readings of Africa. Such sites would throw people off their routine reading and deciphering of African spaces. Identifying such sites entails working with new archives—or even with old archives in new ways” (2004, p. 352).
In concluding, I invoke Adusei-Poku and Thompson as I meditate on what is at stake; I consider the localized focus of post-black as a means to negotiate and define identity, while not engaging art practices as interdependent. Drawing from *Figures and Fiction: Contemporary South African Art*, presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum in June of 2011, Salah Hassan (2012) points to three overlapping concerns that animate a consideration of the Afropolitan. Hassan asks, what are the concepts and theories that artists in *Figures and Fiction* (2011)—and, more broadly, artists engaged in something called “black cultural production”—deploy and put to use? How might we look at their art as transnational products within theories of diaspora? Finally, how might we come to understand movement when the notion is compounded by involuntary and voluntary forms of dispersal? Afropolitanism and post-black might more productively be registered as “aesthetics of feeling” concerning work by black-diaspora artists; I argue that such an application is grounded in contestation and more readily points to a constellation of affective registries that work against definitive formations. The aesthetics of feeling animates bafflement as a strategy for aesthetic response and as a translocal articulation of slavery and colonialism. By highlighting the Studio Museum of Harlem, I seek to broaden the conversation on post-black in the North American context by emphasizing its diaspora formations. As a cultural institution in the United States, the Studio Museum of Harlem has been formative in conceptualizing the pulse of African-American and African-diaspora art and culture. To think differently about how narratives of post-black are deployed through a diaspora frame is to read the history of the Studio Museum of Harlem against the grain and to reanimate its contributions as one that must be seen through diaspora itself and as one that is already diasporic, even when it goes unacknowledged.

This section has sought to contextualize bafflement through a consideration of the human, racial slavery, and diaspora. I have interrogated how a liberal humanist philosophy and subsequent posthuman critique hinges on the expulsion of women and of black subjectivities from the category of human. Further, I have noted how black-studies scholars (including Wynter, McKittrick, Walcott, Wilderson, Hartman) have argued the significance of racial slavery, colonialism, and globalization to reconfigure the liberal humanist project. Diaspora—as an analytic frame in which to consider such migrations, violent and otherwise—is an important approach in unhinging neoliberal humanist formulations. Diaspora highlights contradictions in ideological and political regimes. While debates around the genealogies of internationalism, transnationalism, and diaspora are fraught; its epistemological contributions are in its ability to
exist across maps and geographical registries. As conjunctual frames, queer-of-colour critique and black/queer/diaspora bring into focus messy intimacies between race, class, gender, and sexuality.

1.2 Towards a Poetics of Bafflement

I come to bafflement through middle-passage and “door of no return” epistemologies. These epistemologies encompass physical and psychic articulations of belonging. They reference the geographic location of castles and ports along the western coast of Africa and the Atlantic waters in which the enslaved were gathered and dispersed across the Americas and Caribbean. Such epistemologies may be seen to mark articulations of longing and belonging, memory and forgetfulness that inform new-world black subjectivities. Further, they mark the threshold between geographical sites of migration and dispossession and diasporic ground, which mark a past that informs the future. Subsequently, the door and middle passage inform black/queer/diaspora. Making real this constellation of movements, middle-passage literatures shape how new-world subjectivities negotiate belonging. Scholars across disciplines have explored middle-passage epistemologies as a means of narrating new-world black subjectivities (Angelou, 2010; Brand, 2001; Diawara, 1998; Gilroy, 1993). Within visual art, exhibitions and curated projects have considered middle-passage epistemologies in relation to aesthetics. Most notably, Tate Liverpool’s Afro-Modernity: Journey’s through the Black Atlantic (2010) puts to use Paul Gilroy’s black Atlantic. My intention is not to conflate overlapping, diverging, and converging lineages of movement and non/belonging in black-diaspora literature, art, and culture. Rather, I am interested in highlighting how contemporary discourses of blackness and belonging inform visuality and how the visual is made legible through such movements. These

19 Maya Angelou’s All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes (2010) negotiates the author’s time in Accra, Ghana and the challenges of assimilation into African culture, which she, as someone from the diaspora, concludes is unattainable. Dionne Brand, in A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (2001), charts out a door through which traditional mapmaking strategies are obsolete. To locate the door is to relinquish the claim that it can in fact be pinned down and named. Others have written of relation and struggle with difference in Africa, colonial legacies and Western influence (Adichie, 2013; Diawara, 1998). Manthia Diawara in In Search of Africa (1998) discusses his journey back to Guinea after thirty-two years of being exiled from the country and residing in the United States. He asserts the challenges of return through past and present and the struggle for an Africa in search of it future. Mapping out the story of his search to locate a childhood friend and for a film project navigating the Sékou Touré, Guinea’s first post-independence leader, Diawara engages questions of modernity, blackness, and Africa’s future, through autobiographical conversations with writers of the time and a series of “situations” offering theoretical reflections on the above themes. His purpose is to consider diasporic movement, colonialism, tradition and modernity and its role in shaping an African present.
discourses are negotiated through diasporic formations that include overlapping historical influences of voluntary and forced migration. Such multiple movements inform the lives of blacks in the diaspora from various vantage points. These literatures provoke questions of what is at stake in thinking through discourses of blackness, visuality, and affect. To this end, a turn to the work of bafflement and some definitions of use are in order.

1.2.1 Literatures of Bafflement

Claret M. Vargas first applies the term “poetics of bafflement” in the literary imagination to read for a space where knowledge is postponed and undermined in the work of Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Vargas (2007) frames the poetics of bafflement as a site where

frustration and confusion in the face of that which cannot be understood become the condition through which the poetic I can approach the unknowable.

Bafflement emerges not through a thematic confusion, but rather through literary devices that unsettle the seamlessness of the poetic voice and its language. (p. 458)

For Vargas (2007), a poetics of bafflement functions through literary devices such as grammar, punctuation, diction, and style. Literary devices are the sites where seamlessness can be unsettled and where rupture occurs. Here the inability to understand—an unsettled seamlessness—creates an environment of confusion and frustration for the speaker (poetic I) in the text. Frustration and confusion create an environment in which “I” can approach and move through unknown space. Poetics of bafflement, then, is the means in which Drummond can “speak to the density of an Other’s world” (Vargas, 2008, p. 458) in order to engage ethical concerns.20

20 Vargas conducts close readings of three of Drummond’s poems, including “Menino chorando na noite” (“Boy Crying at Night”), where he notes the poem engages perception. In “Menino chorando na noite” what the speaker imagines and what the speaker can actually perceive is considered. Originally written in Portuguese, “Menino chorando na noite” can be found below in its English translation.

The night slowly and warm, dead night without noise, a boy cries.
Crying behind the wall, the light behind the glass,
are lost in the shadow of the muffled footsteps, voices exhausted.
Yet to hear the rumor. Drop falling in medicine spoon.

A boy cries at night, behind the wall, behind the street,
a child cries out, perhaps in another city,
My primary focus is to examine Vargas’s poetics of bafflement and my own interest in extending the scope of its use, particularly as it relates to the visual. In Drummond de Andrade’s “Menino chorando na noite” the Other is expressed through the position of the child, crying in what the speaker understands to be another world—beyond the wall. Vargas interprets the poetic I’s attempt to make central the experience of the crying child as a turn to self-reflexivity. It is in this search for a platform from which to speak of the density of the Other’s world and the turn towards a self-reflexive narrative that Vargas suggests Drummond engages the ethical.

Drummond’s poetics of bafflement then, is the “speaker’s discovery of his own marginality through the construction of the ‘Other’ as what matters” (Vargas, 2008, p. 459). The focus of the poetic I shifts to imagine what happens to the crying child. Drummond de Andrade writes, “I see the hand that lifts the spoon while the other supports the head.” Is this the sight/site of Vargas’s ethical claim? Is this turning towards the child as that which consumes the attention of the speaker, what Vargas understands to be an ethical move of perception? Vargas suggests that this is the clarity of a poetics of bafflement emerging through the poem—not because of the weeping child but, rather, through how the speaker is changed by an unknown in which the initial descriptive authority of the speaker becomes the source of their very precariousness (Vargas, 2008, p. 459).

It is not, then, a question of the limitations of language, but rather a new question of how to make the limitations of knowledge and of lyrical expression visible through the use of the very perspective and poetic voice that is being questioned. (Vargas, 2008, p. 459)

Again, Vargas’s primary concern emerges—to read Drummond’s work for the way in which the poetic I articulates an ethical representation of the Other. This ethical representation is one that moves away from a search for knowledge and possession to conceptions of understanding and perhaps in another world.

I see the hand that lifts the spoon while the other supports the head
and I see the oily thread that runs down the boy’s chin,
runs down the street, runs through the city (only one wire.)
And there's nobody else in the world except this boy crying.
dialogue (Vargas, 2008, p. 457). Vargas’s utilization of the poetics of bafflement works through Drummond’s use of language, the poetic I, and its relationship to the unknown Other as a means to note a quest for knowledge—one that is not impossible but is self-reflexive and productively incomplete (p. 461).

Since Vargas’s preoccupation is an ethical one, from which a series of questions emerge: How does subjectivity become a question of ethics? What assumptive qualities inform the ethical sphere? Put another way, how might a question of morale be problematized in the face of the normative standpoint (speaker position) over-determining the way in which the Other can even be imagined? What assumptive qualities of the ethical must be utilized in order for the poetic I to experience a self-reflexivity based in its own subject-ness and in relation to the nonsubjectivity of the Other? What ethical claims does the speaker’s self-reflexivity require? I am specifically interested in the way in which the speaker’s subjectivity remains central to the poem, even in a moment of self-reflexivity. How, then, does the self-reflexive centrality of the speaker reproduce the marginality of the Other and, in turn, make the world beyond the wall only possible through the imagination of the speaker? This is a series of questions I turn back to, as I consider a poetics of bafflement and its application to Black subjectivities.

Vargas’s (2008) use of a poetics of bafflement, and its specificity to Drummond’s work, provides a beginning and a productive endeavour for emerging audible/visual/literary mediations of being and belonging. While Vargas initiates some initial complications to bafflement and the literary imagination, she stops at what I believe is her most insightful question, “How to make the limitations of knowledge and of lyrical expression visible through the use of the very perspective and poetic voice that is being questioned” (p. 459). How does the unsettled poetic voice, the site of rupture, the very space that speaks to limits of knowledge, encourage one to look for audible and visible traces of possibility? Vargas leaves us in the poetic I. Indeed, she leaves us in the specificity of Drummond’s work. I am less inclined to tolerate the poetic I as the focal point; in fact, its very over-determined existence, a literary subjectivity, is the problem of the Negro, of black being. From Vargas’s attentiveness to literary devices, we do glean the affect space of confusion and frustration as the environment that creates both rupture and the ethical question of perceiving the Other.
A further consideration of bafflement is in order. In liminality, the work of a theory of bafflement might come to bear. Ambivalence is something experienced differently by black subjectivities. Celebratory and pathological discourses of blackness continue to be sites of debates that are troubling, unpredictable, and contested. Theories of bafflement expose critical methodologies in which to attune oneself to the sense, emotion, and interpretation that act in the liminal spaces of confusion and frustration before meaning is fixed. Turning from a poetics of bafflement in the literary imagination to a consideration of representation and fields of vision (perception), I operationalize bafflement through an exploration of racial difference in aesthetics studies and through performance and performativity. In this way, bafflement acts as a methodology and an aesthetic of confusion and frustration, which takes into account black/queer/diaspora practices and categories of the human.

1.2.2 Bafflement’s Fields of Vision: Literary Imagination, Politics of Representation to Visuality

Methodologically, when contemplating bafflement in relation to the visual, it is important to extend Vargas’s use of literary devices to engage with multiple genres of form. The literary and visual have long since been theorized in tandem with one another. Categorizing a history of philosophy and its political attachments, Richard Rorty (1980) understands a genealogy of philosophy as a set of turns in which a “new set of problems emerge and the old ones fade away” (p. 263). Rorty’s preoccupation for the linguist turn is to move away from an obsession in philosophy with epistemology and the image as a figure representing transparency and realism. Rorty believes the problem of modern epistemology hinges on a picture of the mind that functions as a mirror intended to represent external realities. The temptation of positivism and scientism, in the mirror, evokes Rorty’s anxieties regarding visual representation and its influence on linguistic meaning. The linguistic turn marks a historical trajectory in philosophy, which W. J. T. Mitchell (1995) notes has had significant resonance with other disciplinary fields, including semiotics and rhetoric, and has influenced visual-studies scholarship on art, media, and cultural form (p. 11). Considering what he calls the pictorial turn in intellectual and academic scholarship, Mitchell traces a genealogy of theoretical concerns that engage the linguistic and the visual in Anglo-American philosophy. This trajectory ranges from Charles Pierce’s semiotics to Nelson Goodman’s language of art. Within the context of Europe, one might locate the pictorial turn in phenomenological experiences of imagination, in visual experience, in Derrida’s
grammatology, and in Michel Foucault’s presentation of history and theory; locating this pictorial turn exposes the rupture between the discursive and the visual, the seeable, sayable, and scopic regimes of modernity (Mitchell, 1995, p. 12). Mitchell continues,

> What makes for the sense of a pictorial turn, then, is not that we have some powerful account of visual representation that is dictating the terms of cultural theory, but that pictures form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry. The picture now has a status . . . emerging as a central topic of discuss in the human science in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself) and as an unsolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own “science.” (pp. 11–13)

A turn to the image is not about formulating definitive interpretation models of the image, but rather is about attuning oneself to the prevalence of images at this conjecture. Further images offer a site of friction, rupture, and un/resolvability that influence a broad range of intellectual thought. Simultaneously, a pictorial turn and the genealogy of theoretical concerns that Mitchell points to appropriately notes how braided linguist and visual codes are with one another. Of this current conjecture, Mitchell (1995) further states,

> The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of “spectacle” (Guy Debord), “surveillance” (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them. (p. 12)

Lingering in Mitchell’s insights are questions regarding the very nature of the image as unknown and simultaneously hinged on the contexts that produce and circulate it. The line between the discursive and the visual are blurred. One the one hand, boundaries between discourse, visuality, and cultural production are actively negotiated, shifting from one modality to the next and often overlapping. On the other hand, explicit code-based disruption of literary and visual devices animate relations between discursivity and visuality through a matrix of cross-media that pushes the boundaries of the seeable and knowable.
A poetics of bafflement must appropriately acknowledge this cross-mediated platform of living in the world. Meaningful content appears in multiple forms where the visual moves from one form to another (e.g., text, print images, digital multimedia, audio-visuality) and where slippages between genres are pronounced and apparent in theorization. Problematizing bafflement through the discursive and the visual continues with its etymology.

As a verb, to baffle means to frustrate, check, puzzle, or bewilder a person or something, through confusion or perplexity; to stymie and/or to impede the force or movement of something (Merriam Webster online dictionary, n.d.). Frustration suggests un-sureness, a mistrust of the object-location that causes the frustration. It might mean to feel stuck. But stuck in what? What does feeling stuck register as? Feel like? The source of being stuck is contextual and the secondary affective modes it registers can be debilitating and hopeless. One can be stuck on a thought that does not quite catch, does not quite make sense, does not feel possible, or is partially illegible and partially legible. Legibility suggests some part of the thing causes puzzlement based on reference and memory. Does bafflement, then, have to do with memory? Remembering? Perhaps even a desire to remember? To forget? Could active forgetting cause bafflement? Bafflement has much to do with memory and what is forgotten or remembered and interpolated through the work of memory. If, in its definition, bafflement causes frustration and confusion, memory is located in how confusion and frustration function—in how confusion and frustration can both work to omit strands of recollection and recognition while simultaneously bringing to the surface other memories.

Confusion inflects differently then does frustration. Frustration implies a knowing of the object-thing that brings forth frustration (I am frustrated by the subject in this image.), whereas confusion points to a misreading, misinterpretation, and/or misrecognition of the object-thing causing bafflement (I am confused by the subject in this image). How does bafflement symptomatic of frustration mark a different conclusion than bafflement that is symptomatic of confusion? Both sentiments confront the object-subject. Does this mean the causes of confusion and frustration sit outside the subject experiences of such sentiments? Can the site of bafflement also be located within the subject? Bafflement located in interiority suggests one turn towards oneself as both a site of repulsion and pleasure. I suggest bafflement is located outside and inside of the object-subject of study and, more broadly, that it is not easily discernible. What, then, happens when we apply the experience of bafflement to a specific object-subject? If bafflement
can be caused both outside and inside of the subject, how do confusion and/or frustration register new meaning and/or attune differently to perception? If the object-subject of bafflement is blackness itself (discourses of blackness) what insights can be discerned?

Here then is my intention in mobilizing bafflement: I am interested in bafflement as a type of interference. This interference hinges on hampering easy interpretations that adhere to subjects and objects. Since my object of study is black visual culture, bafflement as a methodological-approach point to the performativity and affective qualities that circulate in the work of Lawson, Thomas, and Muholi and in the archives that black visual culture draws upon. From a historical standpoint, black culture production has been involved in negotiating concerns in visuality through questions of representations, spectatorship, and circulation. These debates continue to proliferate, and it is here that I turn as a means to further develop the work of bafflement.

1.2.3 Visuality, Vision, and the Field of Vision

Representation refers to how language and systems of knowledge production work together to produce and circulate meaning, particularly where it coalesces in symbolic form. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that culture, representation, and meaning are critical sites of social action and intervention where power relations are both established and unsettled. From this perspective, representation is animated through power structures, institutions, and the people who craft meaning from signs (Hall, 1997). Representation becomes the process through which meanings are created and reified. By keeping representation open and disrupting naturalization of the image, new knowledge(s), subjectivities, and dimensions of meaning can emerge. Hall’s politics of representation notes a multiplicity of overlapping symbols rather than one monolithic one. Similarly, Mitchell (1995) understands representation to be part of a larger project of visual culture; he states, “representation (in memory, in verbal descriptions, in images) not only ‘mediates’ our knowledge (of slavery and of many other things), but obstructs, fragments, and negates that knowledge” (p. 188). Representation does not only mediate the knowledge we consume, it also effects its reception, interpretation, and application through negation and informs the dynamics of knowledge production. A debate on the field of vision that black cultural production operates in and through, asks us to think critically and perhaps differently with Hall’s assertion of the connection between culture, politics, and meaning, particularly when
considering who produces images and how meaning might be foreclosed. Hall’s substantial work on images and the politics of representation has been powerful for thinking through circulation and interpellation of the image. A political economy of images offers layers to culture and representation beyond truth and value; the politics of representation, then, is instrumental to a turn to the visual and its relationship to black subject formation.

A turn to the visual is not meant to foreclose productive work on representation and race, but rather to highlight this literature’s impact on contemporary visual studies. The visual turn marks a conceptual shift that, in the spirit of Stuart Hall, pays attention to the function of difference and the sociohistorical context that inform such difference. This animates representation claims that go beyond the limits of what is a good or bad image. A consideration of the field of vision through agents of sight and as an object in the discourse of visuality is in order. A turn to agency and discourse in visuality must consider how scholars of race mobilize aesthetics and affective claims. It is here that the liberal human and the optics of difference are disrupted. In my use of field of vision, I point to overlapping archives of meaning that inform the visual sphere. In this way, like Vargas’s assessment of perception, a consideration of the field of vision makes visible regimes of control and dominance that structure sight.

Contemporary thinkers have been at the forefront of visuality, power, and emotion, disrupting prescriptive notions of what black art and culture is and can be. In this vein, a growing body of work that pays attention to visual artists in art history and visual and cultural studies has been important to thinking about race, gender, and diaspora (Doy, 2000; English, 2007; Fleetwood, 2011; González, 2011; Wallace, 2004). Such works have sought to rework the focus of how black visual art is taken up within art institutions, genres of art production, and critiques of nation.

Gen Doy’s *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (2000) focuses on the way black visual artists manoeuvre particular social, cultural, and economic contexts on the cusp of modern and postmodern millennial debates. She states, “The intersection of modernism and postmodernity in the practice of black visual culture has entered a qualitative new stage in relation

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21 Spectatorship, the gaze and the Other have been instrumental in such scholarship in response to the inadequacies of Eurocentric claims in shaping representation (Bhabha, 2004; hooks, 1992; Wallace, 2004).
to cultural politics” (p. 10). Focusing on the work of British and North American artists, Doy explores concerns she believes are embodied in black cultural production, particularly around memory, identity, and belonging. Such a turn highlights the new stage of cultural politics that black artists negotiate in the postmodern moment. Within the international art market, this view of diaspora and ethnic art is often touted as more interesting, but it also posits the artist in contradictory spaces. Doy’s historical explanation of black offers context to engage British-ness in contemporary black cultural production.

Asserting that the aesthetic and formal nuances of black artists cannot be fully imagined in labelling the art black, Darby English (2007) notes the challenges of such a claim, even when the work is introduced through art institutions whose politics align with such an idea. English’s intervention is at the level of interpretation, in which the spectator is cautioned not to allow an overdetermination based on prescriptive narratives of what a black aesthetic is. In *Subject to Displace: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, Jennifer González (2011) asserts that the past two decades of artist work in the US have addressed socio-historical contexts and aesthetic frameworks through which subject formation transpires in relation to race discourse, extending methods from art to create innovate installation works. Her intention is to conceive of the way race discourse in installation art animates critical intervention that troubles the way nation tells the story of its past and locates culture in its citizens of the present.

Pointing to how racial discourses inform the field of vision, Nicole Fleetwood (2011) explores the visual know-ability and intelligibility of blackness particularly as it relates to subjectivity and visuality (p. 15). Thinking through Michele Wallace’s critique of the limitations of a focus on cultural representation at the expense of a field of vision that uses invisibility and racism to interpret an inability to see (Wallace, 2004, pp. 364–380), Fleetwood notes the way in which this field of vision sutures racial discourses (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 341). Further, Fleetwood’s

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22 Given the historical contexts in which Britain negotiates racial politics, Doy’s (2000) discussion of the use of black is important. Black emerges from what might be considered a political impetus of antiracist and civil-rights minded activists in the US. During the 1960s, *black* emerged as a means to replace *coloured* and, in turn, animate self-naming. This was adopted to some degree in Britain, around the reclamation that “black is beautiful” and as a means to thinking about the exclusion of immigrant populations and anti-black racism in conceptions of British-ness. In the 1970s it was not uncommon to see Chinese, Turkish, Iranian, South Asian, and Caribbean people collaborating as “black”. Yet it is clear that the uses of black in Britain do not result in unanimous meaning and application of the term (p. 7). Doy uses black, instead of ethnic indicators, to preserve a history of collective response to race oppression in Britain.
engagement with racial iconography astutely points to the challenges and limitations of images that create opportunities for the nation to gather around a particular seeing of blackness, while erasing the nuances of black experience and discourses of race (p. 10).

In turn, visual studies scholars have looked for a grammar for understanding visuality that addresses the sight/site of the image as one affiliated with what people do with images and one that explores the presence of the visual subject as both agent of sight and object of visual discourses. W. J. T. Mitchell’s (2005) discussion of the “lives of images,” for example, notes how the visual is imbued with living qualities, which utilize ideology, power, and agency and, subsequently, function in broader ecosystems (media) (p. 90). He notes that images have a considerable sway over how they evoke fear and seduce, illuminate, and haunt daily lives. In relation to the object of empire, images become ideological grounds for imperialism (Mitchell, 2005, p. 162).

Hal Foster’s edited collection, *Vision and Visuality* (1988), identifies the two terms as the physical process of site (vision) and the social fact (visuality). Yet, Foster notes the difficulty in distinguishing between the two and suggests a dialectic approach—one that even in the words’ differences, “slips the superimpositions out of focus” (1988, p. ix). This view emphasizes that the cultural and historical implications of vision and visuality then shift and, thus, provides an approach to visual culture that focuses on the objectivity of vision. Far from a poststructural art term, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle first discussed visuality in the 1830s. As a response to emancipatory movements stemming from the French Revolution, and in opposition to chartism and panopticism, Carlyle was concerned with imagining moral imperialism (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 54). Carlyle’s discourse of visualized heroisms was central to Anglophone imperial culture. Such strategies, deployed by Carlyle and other key emancipatory figures of the time (e.g., Marx and Hegel), attempted to vision the imperial “hero” differently. For Carlyle, the embodied hero represented the agent of visuality. Engaging this history in his article “On Visuality” (2006) Nicholas Mirzoeff describes Carlyle’s embodied hero as “part of the modern production of the visual subject, a person who is both agent of sight (regardless of ability to see) and the object of discourse of visuality” (2006, p. 54). Subsequently, it is here in this history of the term that Mirzoeff locates the contradiction and challenge of vision and visuality. He states, “Here lies the contradictory source of resonance of ‘visuality’ as a key word for visual culture as both a mode
for representing imperial culture and a means for resisting it by means of reverse appropriation” (p. 54).

Visuality, in both meaning and historical implication, becomes a potent tool to shore up imperial subject formation as well as to respond to and reverse such a hold. Its complex genealogy in nineteenth and twentieth-century optical science implies transnational and transcultural shape, constituted via agents of sight and through discourses of visuality. Visuality must deal with the complexity of writing history through the plurality of time in space (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 76). To this end, vision and visuality are not neutral. Judith Butler notes, “The field of vision is not neutral to the question of race; it in itself is a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (Butler in Fleetwood 2011, p. 7). The visual field is a place that is located in a historical moment, but also one that engages the object/subject of study within a set of discursive frames that have already been imagined, prior to its application to the image.

## 1.2.4 Race, Aesthetics, and Interiority

Nicholas Mirzoeff’s historicization of vision and visuality is informed by the pervasiveness with which imperialism shapes the field of vision and visuality (2006). His later project, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011) further expounds on visuality as that which sutures authority to power, rendering it natural. Thus, in modernity, the right to look is an ongoing contest between visuality and countervisuality (p. 2). While spending a considerable amount of time on Thomas Carlyle’s first uses of visualization and vision, Mirzoeff turns to the negotiation of veiled lines of colour, gender, and sexuality in thinking about modes of countervisuality. This highlights how the occurrence of racial antagonism and the consequences of slavery are recurrent themes in visuality and how its discourses are instrumental to modernist projects while simultaneously revealing supple sites of possibility. Mirzoeff (2006) further underscores Carlyle’s staunch support of heroic imperial visuality (world picture) and dislike for other visuality, as represented through the abolition of slavery (excess of visuality that refuses to cohere to that picture).

W. E. B. Du Bois (1994) studied Thomas Carlyle’s heroic visuality and deployed stylistic strategies in *Souls of Black Folk*. Yet, as Mirzoeff notes, it is here that Du Bois puts to use a veiled visuality, one that divides and deviates from Carlyle’s heroic vision. In his identification of the Negro, Du Bois (1994) states that such a being is
a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the recognition of the other world. (p. 2).

As a metaphor for race tensions, Du Bois (1994) splits the heroic vision of the Negro and evokes the veil as that which keeps African Americans divided from white peers and also prevents the seeing of the self outside of the dominant viewpoint of racism. Du Bois’s development of a veiled visibility becomes the site of emancipation that Carlyle hopes to prevent. Through a rethinking of the hero through race discourse, Du Bois marks tensions between the individual and the collective (Mirzoeff, 2006, pp. 74, 76). It is subsequently through this veil that Du Bois envisions the failure of emancipation: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. 391). Visuality, subject formation, and Du Boisian double consciousness mark the second turn I wish to make, one that more broadly considers how race informs studies of aesthetics and affect. I make this point, particularly, as continued interest in the work of Martian psychoanalytic scholar Frantz Fanon frames a consideration of black visuality and the study of race and subjectivity. While I continue a more in depth discussion in Chapter 2, it is important to set the stage for some of these interventions.

Noting some of the conceptual limitations of Fanon in imaging black femininities—or, rather, its omission of an intense set of anxieties in its formation—I nevertheless find Fanon’s scholarship informative to a conversation on discourses of blackness and the visual.23 Homi Bhabha (2007) notes the significance of Fanon’s prioritization of the psychic process of racialization in building a grammar for engagement. Fanon’s frequently cited encounter with a white child on a train marks the spatial optics that informs racial antagonism, fear, and anxiety in the spectre of black visibility:

“Dirty nigger!” or simply “Look! A Negro!” I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects. (Fanon, 2008, p. 89)

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23 Lola Young offers a lively discussion on gender, the different ways black and white women are inscribed and Fanon’s inability to envision black women in Black Skin White Mask. See Young, Lola. 1996. “Missing Persons: Fantasizing Black Women in Black Skin, White Mask” in Alan Reed (Ed.), The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation. London: Institute of Contemporary Art and Institute of International Visual Art.
In this moment, the fantasy of the black man—blackness—becomes visible only by inducing fear in the child. Like double consciousness, it is a moment in which Fanon’s subjectivity is shaped through splitting from whiteness and the simultaneous sight of self via dominant perception (terror and fear). Fanon spatializes an aesthetic of anxiety for the colonial subject located in the scopic drive. This drive is based on phantasmal projection and an eroticization of the pleasure of looking from the place of the Other. For visuality, it is this looking that acts as a site of power, knowledge, and sensation of the gaze through the fetishization of the skin signified by racial difference (Read, 1996, p. 20). Fanon’s formulations of the optics of sight and Du Bois’s veiled double consciousness are instrumental in formulating questions of the visual, the personal and collective acts of desire, and the subsequent frustrations of racial antagonism and subject formation. It is in this vacillation between interiority and collective attachments that we see some of the challenges and political impulses of black visual culture.

Instrumental to the shaping of societal affects and personal sentiment is Raymond Williams’s (1977) uses of structures of feelings. Social structures are constantly being created by preemergence emotion. In considering the institutions that form society, one must also consider ideologies of experience that are formulated through something other than intellectualism and conscious cognition. Such preemergences are embedded in feeling. He states,

> It is that we are concerned with the meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations. . . . We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity (Williams 1977, p. 132).

Literature and artistic style, which he terms the *embryonic phase*, becomes the site for these inarticulate experiences. These structures of feeling are “social experiences in solution” (Williams 1977, pp. 133–34). Sarah Ahmed’s (2004) affective economies are also useful in thinking more explicitly of the sociality of feeling and interiority. Ahmed cautions that emotions are not fixed to a location or object; rather they move among sites. She states, “They move sideways (through ‘sticky’ associations between sign, figures and objects) as well as backward
(repression always leaving its trace in the present—hence ‘what sticks’ is also bound up with the ‘absent presence’ of historicity)” (p. 120).

The unfixed quality of emotion is important to note because it troubles the way in which such a sensory field of insight functions. When defining a more dynamic functionality of that which is felt and, in turn, embodied, we must take heed of the historicity, absences, and projections that are at play at the same time.

My turn to bafflement, then, is both a psychic and an aesthetic one, rooted in the haunting of racial slavery. I make this point apparent, particularly as it takes heed of the field of vision and its function in operating through predetermined discourses of racialization and gender. By locating bafflement in the future made by transatlantic slavery, within the psychic struggle of phantasmal projections onto discourse of blackness, and through the field of the visual that is itself a racial formation and epitome, we uncover latent desiring and animate broader possibilities for the human. Necessitating a turn to bafflement as theory of rupture and frustration means to intervene in thinking about human possibility. It is to ask for further exploration of the incoherencies of subjectivities—an exploration that is theorized “as a performance conditioned on a myriad of performances, encounters and interpellations” (Walcott, 2009, p. 85). In this way, I turn to performance and performativity to further theorize bafflement.

1.2.5 Performing Bafflement: Performativity and the Aesthetic of Frustration

Returning to some of my concerns regarding bafflement as a methodology I ask the following questions: What is bafflement preventing in discourses of blackness and black cultural practice? What are the pivots of interference that bafflement relies on? If blackness, for example, is the source of bafflement, what are its ideological registries that enable one to be impeded by, imagined, or otherwise implied by barriers of interference? I wonder, does the act of baffling only impede? Or rather, in impeding the flow to one strand of thinking, might it make room for another? Still further, attempting to move beyond a strangled binary between impediment here and possibility there, might it simultaneously, in confusion, enable multiple formations of disease to be animated? Can dis-ease engender possibility? I suggest that to baffle might both impede and enable additional formations of self-making, which emerge in and through confusion. As a methodological approach, bafflement might mark a set of processes of
interpretation that locate confusion and frustration as a productive pause space, in which to think differently. To suggest that bafflement functions as a methodology is to suggest it might have particular functions, characteristics, and processes of doing that inform its revelations. Bafflement and the performative work it does assist in the operationalization of bafflement.

For performance theory, notions of embodiment, subject formation, behavior, and emotion are integral to the work it does. Performance theory has a history of engaging the way in which race, gender, and other modes of difference are embodied, enacted, and reproduced. On performativity and gender, Judith Butler (1990) remarks that gender is

a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . . [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (p. 271)

To say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1990, p. 278). To this end, performativity has been deployed as a means to disrupt fixed notions of subject formation in favour of one that is destabilized and incoherent. It is also here that discourses of subject formation informs the enactment and subsequent repetition and reproduction of its meaning. On performativity and race, Paul Gilroy’s (1993) admirable attempt to model black Atlantic as a site of negotiation among being and becoming dispels claims of essentialist black identity formations in diaspora. E. Patrick Johnson’s (2003) supplementation situates blackness within performance theory as a means with which to explore the dialogic between being and becoming that does not privilege a definitive and essentialized identity:

I construe being . . . as a site of infinite signification as well as a bodily and material presence. Being calls the viewers attention, not simply to blackness as discourse, but also to embodied blackness in the moment where discourse and flesh conjoin in performance. (p. 42)

The study of behavior and embodiment is not considered in abstraction, but rather in relation to the groups and collectives that display such behaviors. The body functions as a stage in which cultural narratives and discourses are re/enacted and projected onto. The body in some ways is a
screen on which these projections reside, as well as a site of embodied knowledge. Race and
gender, then, function in the doing and offer considerable play between the doing and the how of
the doing. Johnson (2003) asks us to pause at encounters among discourses of blackness and its
bodily and lived realities. The process of embodiment functions as a means for grappling with
the viewer and can be viewed as participating in the event in which discourses of blackness
emerge. Discourses of blackness are constantly being reconstituted and reconfigured.

Embodiment and subject formation are further apparent in Frantz Fanon’s reading of scopic
regimes. Revisiting Fanon’s act of viewing himself being viewed furthers the task of relationality
between being and becoming, between performance and performativity, as seen through the
logics of racial optics. Connecting the psyche to the social milieu, Fanon’s (2008) sociological
imagination examines colonial cultures and their role in legitimating hierarchies of gendered
racialization (p. 19). Here, movement from (white) worlds constitutes not just linguistic changes,
but a transformation of being—a new ontology. A movement across worlds, while transforming
physical space, also has psychic implications that articulate personhood and “new ways of being”
(p. 25). Among its contributions, Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask* reminds of the challenges of
conceptualizing complicated intimacies between nation, empire, and community identifications,
which order society and influence categorizes of the human.

Behaviors in performance theory are not considered in abstraction, but rather in relation to the
groups, collectives, and unit of analysis that exhibit such characteristics. For the purposes of this
study, I focus on the archive(s) of black cultural production from the 1990s to the present and,
more specifically, on the work of Deana Lawson, Mickalene Thomas, and Zanele Muholi. While
performance studies often engage notions of embodiments and subject formation through
practices that are frequently located within staged theatre and performances, I do not explicitly
frame contemporary visual-art practice and bafflement through this approach. I think of the site
of the stage as located outside of physical and discrete performance and theatre events. What I
frame as a stage event may include, firstly, what can be framed as the objects (cultural
productions) that are produced out of lived experience and the psychic and affective registries
these cultural productions produce. In this application, I apply the staged event to the physical
objects of cultural production (e.g., the photograph, collections of images in a series) and the
process of interpretation and interpellation. It is important to highlight that these cultural
productions function in an archive that includes the ephemeral. Secondly, I turn to more
traditional approaches to the staged event. In Chapter 4, for example, I negotiate the work of Zanele Muholi and how she comes to be included in the 55th La Biennale di Venezia and the Bamako Encounters African Photography Biennial. I frame the biennial structure as staged global art events that negotiate psychic and affect articulations of how black cultural production circulates. Performance provides a framework in which to examine how works are mediated through modes of exchange.

I theorize bafflement as performative in order to highlight a return to memory, translation, and repetition of un-seamlessness. Previously, I argued that bafflement utilizes memory through the remembrance and forgetfulness that occur in confusion and frustration. Performance has regarded repetition as a force in which embodiment is reinforced and reimagined. Repetition is integral to performance and memory. Repetition, on the one hand, may vacillate through the mimicry of an event and notation or, on the other, may produce an event providing a new performance. Butler (1990) discusses performance and repetition: “The act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived at the scene” (p. 277). Thus, the performance of gender and race are rehearsed interactions that make use of actors in public spaces. It is here that embodiment is reiterated and subverted through different approaches to repetition. Performativity, linked to discursivity, must also be framed through the untranslatability of certain events, experiences and objects/subjects. Of untranslatability and performance, Diana Taylor (2003) notes,

> the problem of untranslatability, as I see it, is actually a positive one, a necessary stumbling block that reminds us that “we”—whether in our various disciplines, or languages, or geographic locations throughout the Americas—do not simply or unproblematically understand each other. (p. 15)

A return to Butler further enunciates the challenge of translation through repetition. In “Critical Queer,” Butler (1993) differentiates between gender performance and performativity. In this instance, performativity is not simply a singular repetition, but rather a “ritualized repetition of norms” (p. 21). The subject does not stand outside of these norms; the subject, instead, comes into being through discourses of being called and named. The full recognition of the subject is prevented because, at every stage, the instability of the subject itself prevents this full recognition. Bafflement, as a performative practice gets at how confusion and frustration are
actions that recur, over and over again. One can practice and, in turn, participate in bafflement by becoming confused or frustrated by the object/subject in order to experiment with the idea of repetition and instability. Bafflement can also be used to repeat particular narratives of naïveté regarding the subject/object. One example of this is to be baffled by discourses of blackness in visual culture that reproduce pathological blackness.

Bafflement, then, displaces seamlessness in becoming. As a process of doing, the act of being baffled makes seamlessness absurd. It is in the un-seamlessness, the unseemliness of bafflement where confusion and frustration create an unsettled environment. I suggest the unseemliness of bafflement is one that might be better articulated through structures of feeling that circulate and through relation made im/possible. Structures of feeling that foreground an introspective field of thought and the interrogation of affects are imperative for examining social matter. Here, a relationship to bafflement—as a site of affective sensations and as a mode of relationality—is imperative to consider. A poetics of bafflement, as multitexual and multivocal, extends affectivities beyond and in addition to frustration and confusion. While confusion and frustration animate bafflement, they are not the only sites in which bafflement emerges. What is the relation to bafflement through satisfaction and dis-satisfaction, satiation and dis-ease? If bafflement holds relation to desire—a dialectic between pleasure and pain—how might ambivalence inform its poetics? By way of a conclusion, it is useful to engage bafflement through tenuous intimacies and Glissanian relation.

### 1.2.6 Towards a Poetics of Bafflement: Imagining Black Visual Culture and Relationality

Éduoard Glissant, in his seminal text *Poetics of Relation* (1997), considers the idea of belonging in the world, particularly as such a realization is informed by contemporary realities of multiplicity. Without universalizing such ideas of belonging in the world, Glissant sets out to grapple with belonging. He proposes “Relation” to be “an open totality evolving upon itself. . . . In Relation, the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is total diversity” (p. 92). *Poetics of Relation* affords an opportunity for Glissant to circle around the undefinable: “Relation cannot be approached, whereas the definition of it can be, if not decided, at least
imagined” (p. 171). Relation is linked to the Other; identity is produced and remixed through encounter with the Other. Through the clashing of contact between cultures, the circumstances for relation are formed. He states, “evolving cultures infer Relation—the overstepping that grounds their unity diversity” (p. 1). Glissant first points to early formations of identity that were grounded in a reversion to something ancient and ancestal. In relation to the root, culture was formed dualistically, where the Other was a product of opposition, not difference (p. 14–15). Creolization of cultures provides comparison here through errantry and hybridization and exposes the site from which the Other’s unity in diversity springs forth. Since the Other is central to relation, it is through these encounters that relation is made possible. Relation is found in the hull of slave ships and movements across the Atlantic—those sites of genesis that make relation possible. As Glissant (1997) notes, “Right from the first shock of conquest, this movement the movement of colonialism, or ‘arrowlike nomadism’ contained the embryo . . . that would transcend the duality that started it” (p. 56).

Glissant’s poetics of relation, thus, inform my enunciation of a poetics of bafflement. Relation represents the space of the unsettled, unpredictable and non-linear. He states,

I have long since considered the main themes of such a poetics: the dialectics between the oral and the written, the thoughts of multilingualism, the balance between the present moment and duration, the questioning of literary genres, the power of the baroque, the non projectile imaginary construct. But even this constant repetition is sufficient evidence that such a poetics never culminates in some qualitative absolute. Relation is not an absolute toward which every work tangling it, something it never required—that through its poetic and practical and unceasing force attempt to be perfected, to be spoken, simply, that is, to be complete. (Glissant, 1997, p. 35)

When defining a poetics of relation as a mode of history that seeks out a past and future—that is self-defined, aesthetic, and political—relation must consider the work of nostalgia (Glissant,

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24 The presentation of the work itself is worth noting; in performing a poetics, Glissant writes passages, excerpts, and ideas that are at times fragments in an attempt to destabilize linearity. This is further reflected in Betsy Wing’s introduction to Glissant’s (1997) text, where she notes how Glissant negotiates between French and creole to destabilize language and to mimic a living language that relational encounters produce (xii).
Relation occurs in its hope and possibility. Speaking from the context of the Caribbean, Glissant (1997) is imagining the possibility of relation—possibility vehemently lacking in colonialism. This is a possibility that informs postcolonial interactions that do not forget the over-determining effects of the colonial moment. I look to a poetics of bafflement as imagining the possibility of that which frustrates, confuses, and baffles. Further, relation is not totalitarian in its formation of time, place, and encounters. Instead, relation recognizes a turn to the past and into a future that actively seeks to liberate itself from nostalgia (p. 91). Yet, the Deleuzian notion of rhizome—as something that needs no single root and that does not thrive on fixity or permanence—is central to a Glissanian future. Through the concept of rhizome, Glissant suggests a sense of subjectivity attentive to trauma and loss, but also one that is open to a future liberated from nostalgia. This struggle, then, for a poetics of bafflement, is one of Glissanian Relation. Firstly, as methodology bafflement circles around the thing he seeks to explore, while simultaneously working against linear thinking. Secondly, bafflement and its application with visuality is concerned with the discursivity and the seeable. To this end, a poetics of bafflement returns to the creative, the artistic, and the visual; it focuses particularly on the imaginary, as that which alerts us to difference, notably in the fantasy of domination and conquest, in order to seek out a livable world (p. 28). Thirdly, bafflement performs iterations of possibility and relation as the staged event of circulation.

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter begins with a provocation of the centrality of racial slavery in future-making for contemporary black lives and a formation of bafflement. I have engaged an interdisciplinary constellation of scholarship that negotiates the liberal human and its mode of categorization. I have sought to trouble discourses of blackness, discuss diaspora formations, and theorize racial slavery in relation to visuality. An engagement with black diaspora literatures highlights the importance of multiple movements and contexts for black cultural production. Diaspora

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25 Glissant’s relation understands that postcolonial strategies cannot afford to simply critique Western philosophy and the colonial moment. This is why Glissant’s relation can more productively be thought of in relation to the work that diaspora can do. Hall (1996) reminds that “we cannot afford to forget the overdetermining effects of the colonial moment, the ‘work’ which its binaries were constantly required to do to represent the proliferation of cultural difference and form of life, which were always there, within the sutured and over-determined ‘unity’ of that simplifying, over-arching binary, ‘the West and the Rest’” (p. 249).
frameworks provide multivocal and multidimensional tools to engage how black subjectivities populate the world. To return again and again to slavery analytics that engage black diaspora formations is to engage with the impossible possibilities of blackness and to speak through rupture, silence, and trauma to create a grammar of belonging outside of nation formations.

Bafflement is rooted in the haunting of racial slavery and the work of black/queer/diaspora. Bafflement as a methodology is attuned to affective and psychic registries that engage the challenges of fields of vision through racial marking and through the viewing and viewed subject. I make this point apparent, as it deviates from Euro-American formations of bafflement as being only deceitful and confused. To place bafflement in spaces of the psychic and the performative is to struggle with how the field of vision of blackness can both be adhered to and disrupted. By connecting bafflement with the haunting of racial slavery is to animate broader possibilities for the human and it relationship to discursivity and visuality. To turn to bafflement as theoretical scaffold through which to think broadly about human possibility is to continue to expose debates on representations of blackness—whether through the violence of white supremacy and the seduction of respectability or through its interpretation into world-making discourses. It is to articulate how black bodies rearticulate, reinterpret, remix and engage blackness. In the following chapters, I explore bafflement and black visuality—through the familial, the sacred, and the erotic, as well as through national formations of belonging—to conceptualize how contemporary black visuality might come to bear on new possibilities for existence.
Chapter 2
Performing Bafflement: The Everyday, the Erotic, and the Abject

Baby sleeps on. Deana Lawson’s *Baby Sleep* (2011) exposes the profane and the sacred in *Corporeal*, a series of work completed in 2009 through Light Work’s artist residency in Syracuse, New York. Lawson interrogates the nude and the feminine in domesticity. *Baby Sleep* presents several reading problems through difference. The 2011 incarnation displayed at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) shows the woman’s gaze directed outward toward the viewer. The earlier incarnation places the line of sight in interiority through an internal sight/site fixed internally to the femme subject. Against the tropes of black feminine sexuality as asexual (e.g., mammy) or hypersexual (e.g., Jezebel and tragic mulatto) this sleight of eye registers cultural critiques that do not fit neatly into stereotypical manifestations of black femininity.

In the 2011 version, the gaze might read as less definitive; looking off into the distance, this gaze refuses to acknowledge or submit to an omnipotent viewer who consumes the image. The 2009 image, however, returns the gaze and acknowledges viewership that consumes its likeness (hooks, 1992). A deciphering of *Baby Sleep* acknowledges multiple encounters with spectatorship, which function simultaneously as a wound to the black body and as recovery of the black body from an infliction. Among the ranks of an emerging generation of black feminist scholars, Jennifer C. Nash (2014) notes how such readings limit the possibilities of the erotic in black sexual practices (p. 32).

Whether through dismissal or return of the gaze, desire is central in *Baby Sleep*; the subject desires and is the object of desire. Both incarnations of the image work through agency associated with a pleasure that is the subject’s to possess. The subject of the image awakens pleasure in being viewed, coupled with an acknowledged knowing of the terms of its

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26 *Baby Sleep* was originally shown in fall 2009 through Light Work. A different incarnation of the image was presented during MOMA’s 2011 *New Photography Exhibition*.

consumption. Static in the frame, the baby sleeps on and the lover continues to be enthralled in the bosom. Femme tops. The subject/object’s desire controls the sexual encounter. *Baby Sleep* narrates libidinal desire and visuality against the tenuous terrain of blackness by making explicit that desire and black visuality are not mutually exclusive phenomena. As a stand-alone image, *Baby Sleep* registers sexual perversity to the heteronormative nuclear family—mother, father, and baby—reinvigorating a more complex cultural matrix.

2.0 Chapter Overview: Provocations and Baby Sleeps On

Corporeal’s collection of photographs juxtaposes nude bodies alongside found and repurposed images. The series reveals a range of themes that include black life and death, sexuality, family, and relation. The collection animates relation between black sexuality, labour, and pleasure. Posing questions on the location of desire in race, gender, and sexuality, Corporeal performs bafflement through encounters with the abject and the uncanny. The previous chapter explored plantation geographies and black diaspora formations as a resource for outlining a slavery analytic. Racial slavery forms the basis of a poetics of bafflement. Bafflement, as an aesthetic registry of difficult feeling and difficult aesthetics, acts as methodological and theoretical scaffolding for thinking through black visual culture.

This chapter turns to the encounters between bafflement, the abject, and the uncanny that Lawson’s work forces. Against the backdrop of debates in psychoanalysis and contemporary black visuality, I argue desire and race are not mutually exclusive. Grappling with the usefulness of abjection and the uncanny to black visual art and embodiment, I propose bafflement functions as a bridge of differentiation between the abject nonsubjective mourning of an already lost object and the repressed object of the uncanny. This chapter first stages a conversation with psychoanalysis and black studies. Turning to literatures of race, gender, and sexual difference in psychoanalysis, this chapter addresses the skepticism that ensues. An approach to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan requires translation to engage black interiority. The latter part of the chapter utilizes the performativity of bafflement to decipher Corporeal as a difficult “familial.” The difficult familial further enunciates bafflement’s affiliations and divergences between the abject and the uncanny.
2.1 Psychoanalysis and the Fact of Blackness

Postcolonial, feminist, and black-studies scholars have returned to the psychoanalytic imagination to think differently about gender, sexuality, and race by focusing on fields of vision that structure and discipline the body. Poststructural-feminist scholars have also undermined the biological determinism that informs Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan’s gendered subject. In so doing, these thinkers have reconfigured developmental and symbolic registries to imagine psychoanalysis’s implication on gender and sexual difference (Kristeva, 1982; Rose, 2005; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Silverman, 1996). At times, these scholars negotiate scholarship by Freud and Lacan through the social and historical contexts that they write. Other scholars have focused on the maternal as a site of rupture.28

Jacqueline Rose (2005) questions the translation of psychoanalysis to feminism. Making the case for the field of vision and sexuality, Rose points to uneven circulations of desire in cinema and literature, family and nation, sexuality and psychoanalysis. Kaja Silverman (1996) marks Lacan’s mirror stage as a threshold, which places the subject/object within a scopic regime.29 Silverman notes how the ego, idealization, and identification inform the mirror stage. The look is under the pressure of cultural organization, which from pre-assigned positions and through psychic pressure, protects the ego. However, Silverman differentiates the look from the gaze. The look is activity occurring through the human eye while the gaze represents a broader array of interactions (p. 167). In this way, the look sees in contradiction to the gaze and through eyes that can resist regulatory discourses (p. 156). Considering aspects that form the visual domain


29 Lacan’s central claims circulate around the ideas that the self is a misrecognized object of the imaginary; the structuralization of subjectivity is linked to a primary narcissism; ‘the Other’ (person) is unknowable to the self; the universal structure of language effects the formation of the unconscious (Elliott, Social Theory, 123). Lacan considers the human psyche through linguistic and symbolic means, specifically organizing the psyche through the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The mirror stage, located in the imaginary, marks the moment—between six and eighteen months—in which the subject realizes an imaginary unification of the body by means of identifying its own reflection in a mirror. The child identifies a self with this image in the mirror, and in turn “situates the agency of the ego” (Lacan, Écrits, 5). The real, or material and unchangeable truth of the self, left behind after the subject internalizes the experience of entrance into language, resists the mediating process of the Imaginary and is located beyond the symbolic. The symbolic is connected to language and narrative. The symbolic is made possible when the child enters into the social space of language through rules and codes dictated in society.
through the gaze, the look, and the screen, Silverman proposes strategies to circumvent bodily identifications that create social and psychic constraints (p. 3). Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (2000) applies a Lacanian analysis to the study of race as located in sexual difference. Here, race is structured through a field of vision that relies on symbolic codes and cues in which to secure an investment in race logic (p. 2). Arguing that whiteness acts as the “inaugural signifier” for race, whiteness implicates all other racial categories in the logics of difference. Seshadr-Crooks argues that race is fundamentally a regime of looking. Though not reducible to the look, race thrives on major and minor details in order to shore up a symbolic position (p. 2).

Concurrently, black-studies scholarship has considered race and psychoanalysis and noted struggles between how black embodiments are erased and simultaneously utilized as invisible sutures to the psychoanalytic subject (Du Bois, 1994; Fanon, 2008; Madison, 2000; Marriott, 2007; Spillers, 1996; Tate, 1998). The fact of race, interiority, and the fields of vision that are animated articulate what Hortense Spillers (1996) calls “an apposite psychoanalytic protocol for subjects of ‘race’ . . . [and] an entirely new repertoire of inquiry into human relations (p. 733).”

Previously, I have discussed how W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon negotiate scopic regimes that structure blackness. This work has been instrumental in framing the field of vision as a psychoanalytic one. DuBois, through double consciousness, makes explicit connections between inner and outer intimacies that are shaped by racial inequality. A contemporary of Henry James, James Williams, and Sigmund Freud, DuBois was concerned with interiority. Yet as Marjorie Garber (2000) notes, unlike his contemporaries, DuBois was also concerned with mutually embedded historicism. Peter Coviello (2003) notes that DuBois was simultaneously invested in the fate of racially stratified America through the web of inner (personal) and outer (social) affects. Never is this more visible then through DuBois’s struggle between the empirical language of sociology and the passion with which he wrote. DuBois (1994) states, “Thus it is doubly difficult to write of this period calmly, so intense with feeling, so mighty the human passion that swayed and blinded men” (p. 383). It is in this historical archive and its linkage to rhetorical lines of disappointment, human striving, and promise that Coviello (2003) locates DuBois’s inner emotional life (p. 7). Claudia Tate (1998) expounds on interiority in the lesser-known writings of DuBois and marks his vacillation between social and internal desires that enable a matrix of contradictions to “protocols of race and gender.” Tate identifies these normative strategies, protocols of race, gender, and sexuality that discipline racialized subjects
(p. 10). She states, “In short, white patriarchal power determines how we—black and non-blacks, women and men—are to mis-recognize ourselves” (p. 6). Tate’s formulation of misrecognition is important to a later theorization of bafflement’s relationship to the abject and the uncanny as it reads for disruption in unlikely texts. Simultaneously, such misrecognition locates desiring practices in black subjective experience that contradicts protocols of race and gender and renegotiates the terms of vision and affect.

Claudia Tate’s (1998) recognition of disciplining protocols alongside the emotive is significant to practices of desire and bafflement. Tate argues that critiques of the insidiousness of race frame desire as incompatible to it (p. 12). Tate relies on a renegotiation of Freudian and post-Freudian theories of the unconscious to reveal latent textual desire in DuBois’s work, while also accentuating “textual signifiers that repeat a narrative primarily of loss” (p. 181). Tate is able to formulate this analysis by framing Freud’s own latent raciality in a return to the repressed. Tate’s insight is astute as it makes possible some critical modes of critique of Freud and Lacan that pertain to space of race and difference. Like postcolonial scholars, such as Frantz Fanon, psychoanalysis that pays attention to difference helps analyze black textuality by identifying discourses of desire generated in the text (Tate, 1998, p. 17). One of the most well-cited examples of this is Fanon’s revelation of the optics of the gaze. Here, ontological blackness confronts a world history constructed by intimate encounters whereby black subjectivity is the cornerstone of criminality and a site of fear and anxiety.

David Marriott formulates racial fears and anxiety alongside the political and visual culture of state terror that Fanon mobilizes in the look. This is represented through the jaundice-faced corporeality of love and hate. In On Black Men, Marriott (2000) begins with a preoccupation: How does the past, intermingled with future hope, formulate a reality of the present, particularly when this reality is “already a part of a dream” (p. viii)? This is a question that he later answers in Haunted Life: Visual Cultures and Black Modernity (Marriott, 2007) as the occult presence of racial slavery, “nowhere but nevertheless everywhere” (p. xxi). Whether it is through lynching photographs or CCTV that captures the ghost of a boy before his death, Marriott highlights the murderous implications of photographic technologies and their role in defining how black men

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30 Tate notes that desire is not limited to sexual desire and includes the wanting, wishing, yearning, longing, and striving that reveal themselves in unconscious and conscious ways.
are seen and see themselves. According to Marriott (2000), the visual (through photographic technologies) is where black psychic affect (male) emerges as ambivalence to both the act of self-devouring and the doubled mirror reflection of the pleasure of whiteness (p. 39). Never is this most potent then in Marriott’s (2000) reading of Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, where he asks can the film be a site of true black gay pleasure? Marriott asks, does this offer a true reflection because we see “our own beauty” or because we are compelled to see “our true image behind the mirroring in the wake of its loss and dissolution” (p. 108)? Marriott, at best, asserts *Looking for Langston* does not represent a true image but a representation of black desire with which to look as subject and not object in front of the mirror (p. 110).

If Marriott locates the black psychic look as one that presents itself only through doubled mirror reflections of white pleasure, Hortense Spillers complicates this phenomenon. In “All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife was your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race”, Spillers (1996) proposes a difference in relation to Freud, Lacan, and the psychoanalytic canon. Spillers requires that the question of becoming must be situated in the supplemental literacies of the politics and reality of race (p. 712). In one such instance, she mobilizes an African context to Western psychoanalysis. Further, these supplemental literacies among psychoanalysis and race require an engagement with several unstated questions (Spillers, 2003, p. 378). These questions reveal that psychoanalysis and race are not separately contained forms of theorization. Spillers (2003) also argues that race speaks through multiple discourses and inhabits multiple axes of relation (p. 378). She states, “It would be useful to know, however, how other bodies in general, respond to bodies not like their own, and what it is that ‘sees’—in other words, do we look with eyes, or with the psyche” (p. 379). This not only illuminates the multiple axes with which race may speak but also notes that what makes psychoanalytic cultural criticism a possibility is its ability to think the self in relation to others in society. The sociality of the self or what Spillers calls interior intersubjectivity, is the “locus in which self interrogation takes place” (p. 383). Such a sociality of the self must think of the cultural contexts with which interiority emerges. Spillers is quick to highlight that while Freud wrote of the psychoanalytic experience as natural and universal, it is important to be on guard for, yet also consider, these modes of analysis in

relation to the African American community (p. 385). This marks an important synthesis as
Spillers notes an investment in not explicitly dispensing with the challenges of classical
psychoanalysis. She suggests that such a project does not need to focus on how race makes a
difference, but rather on

how that difference carries over its message onto an interior, how “race” as a
poisonous idea, insinuates itself not only across and between ethnicities but
within. What I am positing here is the blankness of “race” where something else
ought to be, that emptying out of which I spoke earlier, the evacuation to be
restituted and recalled as the discipline of a self-critical inquiry. (Spillers, 2003, p.
385)

In naming this process interior intersubjectivity, Spillers engages some of the challenges
articulated by Marriott in the double-mirrored reflection. In order to mobilize such
intersubjectivity, Spillers suggests one must start from scratch and rethink race as political reality
and as something belonging to a constellation of givens (p. 394). Such a critique is not intended
to suggest that the material realities of race do not exist but, rather, to remember the work of race
and racism as one in the province of human ecosystems and not divine law (p. 394). Marriott and
Spillers mark the contours of bafflement in the psychoanalytic imagination as those that
negotiate the confusions of classic psychoanalysis’s inability to see race even as the orbit of race
constituted its enabling postulates.

A turn to black-studies scholarship demonstrates rigorous engagement with classical
psychoanalysis and race and further illuminates bafflement. For Freud, race is the orbit of
engagement that he could not see or theorize, because “the place of their elision marked the
vantage point from which he spoke” (Spillers, 2003, p. 386). Simultaneously, an engagement
with race and psychoanalysis necessitates the question of subject and object (Spillers, 1996, p.
713). A turn to interiority through intersubjectivity positions the unconscious and phantasmal
alongside fields of vision that pay attention to desire and the limits of mourning in particular
contexts. Bafflement, as theoretical confusion linked to racial slavery, can assist in articulating
the discrepancy of mourning an object never in possession for black diaspora subjects. In this
context, the possession under scrutiny is the body and mind of the self. Discrepancies between
mourning a lost object (abject), a return to repressed (uncanny), and mourning an object never in
possession (bafflement) are discussed at length in the subsequent pages. Marriott’s troubling of vision alongside Spillers troubling of classical psychoanalysis for interior intersubjectivity reaches towards bafflement as a performative apparatus with which to think desire and pleasure in blackness.

The following section works with bell hooks’ iteration of the family album. hooks expresses the home gallery as affective archive and memory forged through black social space. hooks does not explicitly formulate links between psychoanalysis and the visual, yet underlying the home gallery is attention to the inner and outer worlds of black material life. I, then, put hooks’ home gallery into conversation with queer-of-colour critique (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2004). hooks’s use of domestic space as social affect read, in tandem with Cathy Cohen and Roderick Ferguson’s queerly oriented familial, assists in supporting Lawson’s Corporeal as a difficult familial.

2.2 Desiring Bodies and the Ruse of the Familial

In Art on My Mind (1995) bell hooks discusses the importance of photography in the lives of black people, particularly as photographs create opportunities to frame collective identifications and participate in the oppositional gaze. This gaze enables active critique of representations of black subjectivities. The domestic space of the home provides the site where family, through pictorial narration, can be formed despite anti-black racism. As a mode of oppositional critique, hooks writes of her own encounter with photographs displayed on the walls of her grandmother’s home.

> Throughout our childhood, visits to her house were like trips to a gallery or museum—experiences we did not have because of racial segregation. We would stand before the walls of image and learn the importance of the arrangement, why a certain photo was placed here and not there. (p. 54)

It is here that hooks is able to think about home space as self-realizing narration and engage in broader psycho-social archival strategies of belonging amidst stringent segregation in the United States. The home gallery becomes a critical method for crafting identifications of the self and the social, as well as a discursive tool to generate narratives of intimacy and relation. Through the act of display, the home gallery provides an articulation of how black life in the diaspora forms
new futures. hooks (1995) forges connection between the private lives of home galleries and the public and social landscapes of representational politics as a tool of cultural recovery (p. 48). It is through such galleries that black people make connections that “ensure against the losses of the past” (p. 51).

hooks’s use of the home gallery can benefit from further interpellation. I turn to Cathy Cohen and Roderick Ferguson’s use of queer-of-colour critique to further negotiate the terrain of the home, the familial, and black visuality. In “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” Cathy Cohen (1997) notes a struggle over the terrain of normativity by warning against framing the non-normative in the dialectic of straight and queer. Arguing for a more nuanced understanding of power and privilege, Cohen offers the example of the welfare mother, whose non-normative, though heterosexual, practices are regulated by the state and thus cannot fully be captured by the framework of straight privilege and queer marginality. With particular attention to codes of racialization, Roderick Ferguson (2004) argues that racialized labour is already cast outside of heteronormativity and thus inherently queer. Heterosexuality, gender, and sexual integrity are not all that is at stake in normative formations of the familial; racial integrity and purity are risked (p. 17). In one such example, Ferguson turns to a scene in Marlon Rigg’s Tongues Untied (1989), in which a drag queen sashays along the waterfront and signals contemporary interpretation of social economy. Entanglement between sexual difference and racial excess forms the basis of a social economy of blackness as already queer. The drag queen exemplifies a series of alienations and estrangements that secure how her “racial difference is inseparable from her sexual incongruity, her gender eccentricity, and her class marginality” (p. 1). For Ferguson, this scene represents a broader estrangement that black cultural spaces encounter.

Turning to a queer-of-colour critique alongside the home gallery throws heteronormativity into disarray. Imagining blackness as already queer makes visible the silences of respectability that undergird hooks’s home gallery. Such a reading is not to diminish hooks’s home gallery as a critical site of black self-making despite racial antagonisms. Rather, it is to suggest that tenuous

32 The family and race have considerable points of tension in sociology. While the Monyihan Report (1965) signalled the rise in black-single-mother-headed families as a crisis of the nation, earlier works by the Chicago School of Sociology signal the black family as a problem. For more see E. Franklin Fraizer’s The Negro Family in the United States (1939). Queer theory has sought to engage familial ties outside of blood relation.
and often troubling formations of home, domesticity, and family function alongside home-gallery self-making. This disrupts the terms of home and display and acknowledges lives in transition and bonds beyond blood relation. While nostalgia and memory are used by hooks to ensure against the loss of the past, Cohen and Ferguson’s insights can be reconfigured to allow room for subjects whose loving familial ties cannot be assumed through blood relation or loving at all. The home gallery and, by extension the album, viewed off-kilter, locates black materiality as already queer through familial lineages that do not adhere to blood relation and reproductivity alone. This forges possibilities for connection and relation with a difference.33

Bafflement functions as a deciphering practice with which to conjoin Lawson’s Corporeal (2009) and a queerly articulated home gallery. Corporeal (2009) makes use of the methodologies of the home gallery as collection and archive of a queerly articulated black familial. The catalogue for Corporeal opens with an image of birth and concludes with the corpse of a stillborn baby. The two images bookend Corporeal and expose the tenuous and intimate link between black life and death. The Beginning (2008) depicts a baby, genderless, still encased in birthing residue arriving into the world. We see little of the surroundings. The birth is the focal point. Further compelling is Lawson’s title, which inquires, a beginning of what? There is a question on the table regarding the entanglement between life and death. Lawson’s titling of the image is a proclamation. The Beginning initiates a series of contradictory conditions within the larger body of work and within bodies of knowledge that shape discourses of blackness. These conditions can be figured through the residue (birthing liquids) and traces (shadowy elements and sterile sensibilities) of birth. These contradictions can also be figured in elements of the grotesque (pained birthing, tight-fisted infant) that resonate in Lawson’s image. But what is birthed, initiated, made possible? The nurse whose body backgrounds the front matter of the image obstructs much of the scene. The obstruction might be read as interruption. The conditions of black birthing depicted in The Beginning illuminate bafflement as aesthetic claim. Bafflement articulated through Spillers intersubjective psychoanalysis deciphers what the image wants. What the image wants is the contradiction of pain in birth with beginnings that collapse into

33 My use of difference draws on Stuart Hall’s breadth of scholarship on race and ethnic difference as a product of postmodernist intervention. Simultaneously, I deploy difference to reflect modes of differentiation (e.g., race, sexuality, gender).
themselves. To this end, bafflement performs desire in an object that cannot mourn what it has never possessed.

The context for *Adorah* (2008) is found in Lawson’s hometown of Syracuse New York, at the Charles Garlands Funeral Home. The presence of the Garlands Funeral Home is an ongoing feature of the series. The image depicts a small corpse wrapped in white silk fabric. A small face peeks through an island of satin; it is deformed. Connotative meanings of the image present further scrutiny. *Adorah* is stillborn at three months and Lawson reflects on how the image’s production resonates with her own experience of the premature birth of her son. Recalling the circumstance in which she comes to photograph *Adorah*, Lawson reflects on the sentimental contradiction of parents regarding the photograph. While the mother desires Adorah to be photographed, the father remains skeptical. Ultimately, Lawson attempts to shoot the stillborn as quickly as possible to provide space for the parents to mourn the loss (Lawson, 2011, n.p.).

Returning to bafflement as visual deciphering practice, these recollections mark tensions between technologies of photography and life and death in the black cultural archive. The ambivalences registered between the mourning of the mother and father generate bafflement’s pause. Documenting death causes one to wonder as to the source of skepticism that the father negotiates. For the purposes of this inquiry, might we suggest the father’s mourning exceeds the photograph as document of loss? In this instance, the document of *Adorah* lives on. The living on of *Adorah* causes death to continually be encountered. Simultaneously, the photograph, as document, provides a second layer of code. Through reproduction, the image creates the constant life of a corpse and stands in for the lost materiality of Adorah. Bafflement performs these ambiguities between life and death, violence and creation.

*The Beginning* and *Adorah* provide figurative beginnings and endings to *Corporeal*, which blur the boundaries of time. Within the narrative of beginning and endings, there is the grotesque and the troubling of the family unit that Lawson interrogates. The implied softness associated with a baby is curtailed by the technicality and often-violent articulation of bringing a being into the world. This is coupled with looming death and a death that reproduces itself. These photographs

34 Here I am thinking of lynching photographs as well as particular practices of families photographing their deceased. I am also thinking of photographs that present particular black life experiences. For some examples, see DeCarava, R., & Hughes, L. (1967), *The sweet flypaper of life*, Hill and Wang; Zee, J. V., Dodson, O., & Billops, C. (1978), *The Harlem book of the dead*, Morgan & Morgan.
ask us to come face to face with what it means to describe a beginning, such as birth, as a spectacle of discomfort and dis-ease with mourning and time. Through the technicality of birth, we visualize the pain of childbirth. The depiction of a baby corpse, not quite fully formed, further juxtaposes distortions to a theme of black life and death. The child is focal, the mother tangential—a missed thought, a trace, an afterthought, the afterbirth.

Reading Lawson’s *Corporeal* through bafflement situates its formation in the realm of the non-familial or difficult familial. While *Corporeal* makes visible the challenges of life and death, the work also provides additional possibilities. Lawson makes explicit preoccupations with the family thematic. In so doing, Lawson articulates an interest in expanding the family album through the use of subject selection that begins with a concept and a stranger to fill the vision (Lawson, 2009). The stranger factors a different registry for the familial where, quite literally, *Corporeal* depicts a collection of strangers who become familiar in the process. Mobilizing queer-of-colour critique, *Corporeal*, as a difficult familial, does not function through cohesion. Rather, the difficult familial mobilizes considerable ambivalences to life, death, and intimacy. Perhaps most telling are the ways Lawson’s *Corporeal*, as a difficult family album, makes visible subjectivities that fall outside of respectable claims of belonging so often noted in family galleries. These fissures in respectability claims have been important in crafting counter-responses to vision. I have sought to situate *Corporeal* in queer-of-colour critique to situate the difficult familial. Additionally, I have considered black-studies scholarship and its encounters with the psychoanalytic. Here I have argued that classical psychoanalysis, through interpellation, can be productive to a critique of interiority and sociality in black life and death. Bafflement has been deployed to strategize such interpellation through *Corporeal*. I now consider how other works in *Corporeal* fall outside of normative, respectable claims. Through abjection and the uncanny, I continue a discussion on the ambivalences of bafflement.

### 2.3 Abjection and the Difficult Familial

Julia Kristeva first introduces abjection in *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Abjection occurs at the site of child rejection of the maternal figure for entry into the world and culture. This is symbolized through the paternal figure, and it is here that the child becomes
socialized and located in power and positioned in society.\textsuperscript{35} The expulsion of the maternal is the site of the abject: the maternal marks excess and, in bodily terms, symbolizes the discarded waste. Through the act of abjection, a distinction between object and subject—between self and other—is lost. Through expulsion, abjection exists outside of subject formation and its objects of meaning. This is because what Freud terms \textit{primal repression} has occurred in order to form the ego (Kristeva, 1982, p. 11). It is through this expulsion and repulsion of the wretched that abjection forms outside the social order. The abject exists between object and subject in liminal space.

Abjection is further revealed through a contrast with Jacques Lacan’s \textit{object petit a}, or object of desire—an object that enables the coordination of desire in a way that allows symbolic meaning to persist. Through object desire, the subject can coordinate desires and allow intersubjectivity and meaning to persist. Abjection behaves differently from object petit a by collapsing symbolic meaning. Neither existing in object or subject, the abject is presymbolic. Kristeva (1982) puts it this way: “Abjection preserves what exists in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (p. 10). Primal repression, then, is where the abject resides before the subject makes an association of meaning to object of desire, between culture and its prehistory. The abject reflects the threat of meaning at its breakdown. The reaction of such a breakdown for the abject animates “what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions or rules” (p. 4). Never is this connection more apparent then with the corpse. The corpse represents an object that once was a subject and literalizes a breakdown between subject/object that is significant to identity formation and entrance into the symbolic order. A return to \textit{The Beginning} and \textit{Adorah} exemplifies the reversal of this process by depicting the ghost of two past moments in birth or in death. As reproductions of long-gone moments, these photographs function as a doubling of object/subject in the corpse.

Abjection must disguise itself from desire, because desire is tied to meaning structures in the symbolic order. In phobia, Kristeva notes a trace of pre-linguistic confrontations with the abject.

\textsuperscript{35} Kristeva locates expulsion in the moments before Freud’s Oedipal stage and Lacan’s pre-mirror stage (1982 2, 10).
The object of fear stands as substitute to the subject’s abject relation to drive. The experience of abjection in literature can carry certain pleasure, but this is one quite distinct from desire. To experience such pleasure, a poetic catharsis is formed (p. 29). Thus the abject is closely tied to aesthetics, religion, and art, particularly as they can purify the abject. Kristeva suggests that modern literature (e.g., Dostoevsky, Proust, Artaud, Céline, Kafka) exposes the places of the abject where boundaries breakdown before self/other and subject/object (p. 22–23). Subsequently, the sublime, through transcendence, is really an attempt to obscure abjection through the reassertion of boundaries. Literature privileges the abject and the sublime, while exposing ways in which language is structured over a lack of want (p. 207). Poetry then, when playing with grammar, metaphor, and meaning, makes it possible to lay bear the fiction of language as both capricious and marred with the abject fear of loss. Kristeva (1982) describes poetry as being

not a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges. (p. 38)

If Kristeva located abjection and its breakdown in the literary, Claudia Tate and Toni Morrison locate abjection explicitly in the context of race discourses. Tate (1998) notes how unconscious registries in character interaction bolster protocols of race and gender. Protocols of race and gender forge a relationship between personal desire and social convention. Toni Morrison (1992), in American literature, emphasizes descriptive codes’ uses in illuminating an ontological difference of whiteness through representations of blackness. Both scholars highlight the role linguistic strategies deploy to form a grammar of racial abjection or double negation.

Difficult familial formations reveal Corporeal as aesthetic abjection. On the surface, a baby corpse, funeral director, stripper, identical twins, and the gender non-conforming represent residual after-effects of expulsion. Nudity, caught between tropes of the hypersexual and the asexual, negotiates banal domestic space. These categories of difference alone reveal components of abjection. However, the ontology of blackness sutures formulations of the self in

36 Freud (1955) outlines two types of drives, the life drive and the death drive. The life drive encompasses pleasure and reality, while the death drive is seen as more primal than the life drive.
the social and requires that blackness function as abject’s abjection. To be clear, if, as Tate and Morrison note, racial discourses rely on blackness as ontological negation, this negation makes possible other subjectivities. Blackness, as negation, provides the social order with material to construct the self in opposition to this doubly cast outsideness of blackness. Dominant social order requires blackness as pathological and deviant in order to reveal its fully embodied self. Yet, as abjection mobilizes in response to the repressed, misrecognition, the object-abject, doubles back on itself. Kristeva notes that, even in recognition, misrecognition instantly follows through the watchman-ship of the repressed.37

Corporeal might more effectively suggest black deviance as the aesthetic blur of bafflement. Initial regulation of the abject disconcerts the terms of its regulatory practices through excess. Bafflement, as affective confusion and ambivalence, emerges in the excess of abjection. Ferguson’s (2004) pathological blackness continues to be informative to Corporeal as aesthetic blur, rupture, and disconcerting ambivalence. Already in excess of the self and the social, Corporeal has nothing to lose. Gender and sexual perversion, as overdetermined excess or excessive overdetermination, is compounded onto biological and cultural inferiority, ultimately justifying black dispossession. Black dispossession functions as excess surplus labour to civil society. Contradiction of black material realities and surplus labour is made pathological, and yet the pathological is already non-normative, framing black social life as rupture (Ferguson, 2004, p. 27).38 Corporeal uses location alongside disconcerting subject matter to frustrate pathological blackness mobilizing misrecognition through bafflement. When returning to bafflement as a visual reading practice, the ambivalence that coalesces in this collection of images causes ambivalence to be misrecognized as simply that which is uncomfortable.

Misrecognition occurs in the use of location that compounds the abjection in Corporeal. Domesticity is mobilized alongside the sexual and the erotic. Some of the locations are bare, uncluttered, and stark in contrast to the subject and background. Some subjects are positioned against blank backgrounds and stark white walls, while others are located in functional spaces

37 “The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (Kristeva 1982 p. 13).
38 Nicole Fleetwood locates further relation to abjection and racialized gender through the concept of excess flesh. A term she developed to “attend to the ways black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess” (2011 p. 105). Her intention is to mobilize a form of redress for how black women are framed too much by ideals of white femininity (2011).
such as the living room, bedroom, or kitchen. The location mesmerizes against the contrast of skin, bone, and flesh. Location does not recede into the background; rather it provides an additional layer to the scene. This might be where bafflement functions as rupture through the use of foregrounding flesh against background. In Sharon (2007), recurring classic postures of feminine nudity works through Fleetwood’s (2011) excess flesh. The buttock, symbol of black excess, centralizes attention, and yet the delicacy of posture and position reveals how black femininity excesses normative femininities. The radiator and sheer curtains act as a reminder of protocols of race and gender located in the ideal of white femininity, while the linguist meaning, through captions, names Lawson’s collaborators.

Black corporeality exists as foci. Ashanti (2006) is not adorned with lavish fabrics and colours. This is unlike the figure in Jean Augustine Dominique Ingres’s odalisque, which the posture of Ashanti references. All that is revealed is the contrast of a bare mattress, the print of pink blossoms against a blue-and-white checkered background, and the delicate drapery of window sheers. There are theatrics embedded in the image. The placement of the bodies are in permanent pose, neither erotic nor mundane. A thematic likeness to Glen Ligon’s Untitled: Four Etchings (1992) emerges. Ligon uses Zora Neale Hurston’s quote “I feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white wall” stencilled in black against a white-canvas surface. Lawson instead uses the body alongside location to mark contrast. Bafflement, as aesthetic blur, registers an outside object or a stark location as an encounter with difficult subjectivities and tenuous representations. In Thai (2009), the subject looks off to the side, highlighting make-up-adorned features. Repurposing classical portraiture’s use of bodily positions (in painting), Thai and Ashanti mobilize excessive flesh alongside citational appropriation that separates body and flesh. Skin, as masking artifice, forms a barrier through incongruity between white wall, flesh space, and comportment.

More intentioned backgrounds and appropriated images utilize surrounding objects and reference points to contribute to the connotative narrative of the image. Diva at 73 Years Old (2009) and Jonita with Dishes (2008) locate subjects in the living room and kitchen who have been particularly feminized and racialized. In contrast to many of the other images in the collection, Diva at 73 Years Old utilizes domestic space to present opulence. Plush decor, artworks, a glittering chandelier, and a fur present the subject of the image. In the monograph, Diva sits alongside an acquired image of Barbara, the image’s protagonist, and a journal entry written by
Lawson. The acquired image depicts a younger Barbara flanked by two young men while at a dinner function. The details of Barbara’s dress are obscured by a watermark that has left this portion of the image distorted. The journal entry describes an exchange between Lawson and Barbara on the evening in which the photographer shared images from the photo shoot. The evening begins rather complexly, with several small excursions around a Brooklyn neighborhood in search of a wine opener, and culminates in the viewing. Lawson (2009) recalls, “Barbara began scanning the images, with the loupe. ‘These look like cult pictures. They would be fine if it wasn’t for the veins in my legs. Which one did you say your husband liked again?’” (p. 18). Barbara’s paraphernalia gestures to a time past. Images work like the dead, ghosts of a past moment. The folding of young Barbara onto ageing Barbara doubles past-self onto present-self. This utilization of multiple selves deploys bafflement through an unsettling of seamlessness in spatial time by literally playing with the ghost of Barbara. Objects that adorn the living space enact the unseemliness of bafflement through artifacts collected over time. The collection of objects compound the self in social space.

Dyads and triads contemplate difficult relations. Daughter (2007) depicts a mother and two children. The baby is asleep on the mother’s lap, while the teenage daughter flanks to the right, nude with the exception of a transparent body stocking that conceals little. Despite the heavy drapes and a fireplace mantel, the room juxtaposes the sentiment of bareness. This perplexes the landscapes of the image, contradicting mother-daughter relations and signalling relational struggle at the level of mother-child relation and on the level of sexual deviation. Framed photographs sit on top the mantel as a last-ditch gesture to familial cohesiveness. Can the viewer relate? Girls with Oiled Faces (2004), shows identical twins in identical outfits posed against a seemingly identically symmetrical couch. The geography of the couch consumes the small twins and their placement highlights the notion that twins function as an island onto themselves.

Reminiscent of Diana Arbus’s eerie depictions of twins, circus performers, and outsiders, Lawson deploys seemingly ordinary environments and circumstances in order to craft unorthodox meaning. The surroundings, subjects, and circumstances create spectacular feeling and baffling disassociations through seemingly benign presentations.

The unseemly chasm between banal domesticity, sexuality, and unorthodox meaning provides a place of pause. Lawson provides multilayered and troubling imagery through the guise of the ordinary. The hyper-ordinary locations and subjects make visible taken-for-granted categories of
relation. This visibility highlights subject formations and a failure to adhere to respectable pictorial representations. Simply put, the images are uncomfortable and at times confrontational and unsettling. Simultaneously, the work juxtaposes seemingly sexual interactions and banal qualities of the erotic. *Corporeal*, as a differently situated family album, rubs up against aesthetic rupture that is not easily reconciled. Through an assortment of visualizations in excess (e.g., black femme, twins, and peculiar familial dyads), *Corporeal* tells contradictory stories of abjection and intimacies of expulsion. Again bafflement, as deciphering practice, acknowledges aesthetic rupture and uneasy sentiment. The affective qualities of *Corporeal* emerge in works that are unsettling. Bafflement further highlights traces of dis-ease through excessive bodily formation. *Corporeal* is populated with abject subjectivities.

Bafflement, then, is akin to abjection; its dis-ease between violence and creation is formulated through corporealities that are already abject. Because Kristeva theorizes abjection as both the maternal and the cast-out object of the self, the abject provides critical metaphors for engaging ontological blackness in the psychoanalytic imagination. The abject functions in the liminal spaces between object and subject. Similarly, ontological blackness mobilizes the slave as object that represents the living nonsubject in civil society. As bafflement charts its course through racial slavery and diaspora formations, it turns to the abject and highlights tensions between object-subject positions. Developing a theory of bafflement in relation to abjection makes possible the impossible. Bafflement, akin to abjection, provides ethical ground to engage beyond race and classical psychoanalysis; relationality between bafflement and the abject can apprehend other articulations of existing in the world outside of enlightenment humanisms.

*Corporeal* exemplifies connections between bafflement and the abject by connoting body and flesh. The body is differentiated from flesh for Spillers (1987). In racial slavery, the flesh that is transformed to property is never fully wiped out in the process of transformation. The flesh registers memory and, in this way, formulates a breakdown between body/psyche differentiations, which the definition of corporeality deploys. The flesh remembers, making itself known to the captive body, and ultimately functions as a site of survival (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). The flesh, as psyche, mobilizes a matrix of remembrance as an active encounter with survival strategies. Corporeality frames the materiality of the body in relation to the soul as “of or relating to a person’s body, especially as opposed to their spirit” or “consisting of material objects; tangible”(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). The soul, often associated with the inner world of being, is
articulated as ephemeral in relation to the tangible material contours of the body. The soul has a blurred relationship with the psyche (conscious, subconscious) and mind. Corporeal juxtaposes body/soul alongside location; this is visible through a brief comparison with Roshini Kempadoo’s series Ghosting (2004). Ghosting overwrites contemporary Caribbean formations through an archive of colonial imperialism, slavery, and indentured servitude. The artist superimposes domestic and plantation spaces, rural fields, and waterways with the imprint of archival photographs of labourers and slaves, signalling their absence in the infrastructure of a fraught landscape. Archival photographs hover almost transparently over perceived tangible landscapes. Lawson, on the other hand, mobilizes opaque flesh onto barren domestic spaces to mark intimacies through disillusionment. As representative of abject subjectivities, Corporeal mobilizes the break between body and flesh to highlight disillusionment. This disillusionment registers a performance of bafflement. Lawson’s Corporeal, through a break with body/psyche dialects, enunciates the unseemliness of flesh memory that remains boundless.

2.3.1 Bafflement, abjection and the uncanny

This chapter has highlighted bafflement’s affiliations with the abject. In particular, the relationship between object-subject and body-flesh has been noted for exemplifying such difficulty in figuring blackness. A turn to abjection and its differentiation from the uncanny is now in order. Such an engagement charts the course of engaging interior intersubjectivity, which Spillers recognizes as imperative to a discussion of race and psychoanalysis. Further, an engagement with the uncanny and the abject illuminates the importance of a theory of bafflement for black visual culture.

Julia Kristeva (1982) premises abjection as a site of mourning for an object that has always been lost. She states, “the abject appears in order to uphold ‘I’ within the Other. The abject is the violence of mourning for an object always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments” (p. 15). The abject is made visible through the self’s need to shore up its boundaries by articulating itself in opposition to the Other. The Other, in this instance, is the maternal and previously cast-out abject object. Abjection, then, mourns this lost or repressed object. This marks a critical distinction between bafflement and the abject. The absolute power of racial slavery requires the slave to be delinked from ownership of the self. Hartman (1997) notes such contradiction and complication in the subject position of the slave through examples
of consent (pp. 83–86). These examples highlight the perils of ownership and the mourning of subjecthood in discourses of blackness. Because subjecthood is never an object owned by the slave, mourning its loss is impossible. We might better ask what does it mean to mourn the desire for an object that has never been yours to begin with? While Kristeva’s abjection signals that mourning an always already lost object can occur through the dominion of racial slavery, the object of subjecthood can only be explored through a phantasmal approach to it—through the desire for an object never possessed.

The distinction between mourning an always-lost object and a repressed object negotiates Kristeva’s differentiation between abjection and Freud’s uncanny. Freud (1955) premises uncanniness as an object that is secretly familiar but is repressed and, through repression, later returned.39 The secret familiarity of the object-memory forms the basis in which a return to the familiar is a moment of repression (p. 245). The formative moment of repression resides in the Oedipal stage. Castration and the uncanny are deeply enmeshed. The child rejects the maternal figure—due to a fear of castration—in favor of socialization into the world through the embrace of the paternal figuration. Freud (1955) hypothesizes,

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\text{Dismembered limb, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist} \ldots \text{all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when} \ldots \text{they prove capable of independent activity in addition. As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to the castration complex. (p. 244)}
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The loss of limbs, or more figuratively, components of the body define the ego and cause fear because of its once-was familiarity. The phantom limb acts as a reminder of something once repressed and, ultimately, as an inkling of familiarity. Relationships between familiar (heimlich) and unfamiliar (unheimlich) are where the uncanny emerges. Uncanniness results when something familiar has an unnerving quality to it. Freud’s (1955) construct of the uncanny makes three central claims. First, deviating from E. Jentsch’s uncanny, the question of real and imagined in narrative fiction is stressed (p. 248). Second, the uncanny is located in the robbery of

39 Freud’s hypothesis of the uncanny is developed through an interrogation of E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman” (1816) and deviates from Ernst Jentsch’s uncanny, located in intellectual uncertainty. Jentsch “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906) concludes that fear of the uncanny is based firstly on the foreign and secondly on intellectual uncertainty. Freud, however, takes issue with both these assertions (1919).
one's eyes or apparatus of sight. This time the loss of eyesight is the metaphor for castration that catapults repression; it is also the locus for aesthetic inquiry. Third, the uncanny traces psychic economy. It is here where nothing from childhood is forgotten. Rather, the uncanny is a return to something from an infantile psychosexual history that has been forgotten, overcome, and repressed. The uncanny is a revelation of what is private and concealed. Concealment occurs at the level of society and the self. It is in the uncanny where a reoccurrence of the long forgotten returns and supersedes psychic life, acting as a reminder of the past. Freud ultimately concludes that the uncanny is not new or foreign at all; rather, it is something familiar, old, and estranged (1955, p. 243).

Kristeva’s (1982) theorization points to a critical differentiation between abjection and uncanniness. The uncanny object is familiar and, finally, recognizable to the ego. Kristeva suggests, however, that in abjection nothing can be familiar, as an encounter with the abject is presocial. She states, “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness,’ more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (p. 5). Abjection is founded on the assertion that nothing is familiar. This is critical as it marks a distinct separation between the self and the non-self. The uncanny is thus premised on a sense of familiarity, while abjection is located in the loss of all familiarity. Because of this, the abject constitutes the non-ego or the Other. Yet further consideration exacerbates a blurring between the two figurations. We return now to the corpse: The absolute source of abjection, once alive and now dead, the corpse functions through an imaginary uncanniness. It is death, infecting life. The corpse is something rejected from which one does not part and from which one does not protect oneself as one would from an object. “Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). In this sense, the quintessential abject object, the corpse, can be uncanny in that we once could find something familiar in it through its once-was aliveness. Un/familiarity in the corpse blurs the boundaries of the abject and the uncanny. The corpse, no longer part of the social order, creates abjection through its very uncanniness. As site of prohibited excess and simultaneous act of ego development, subject- hood is formed. This contradiction is important. Like Freud’s exploration of the uncanny through the overlap between un/familiarity, abjection ultimately doubles back onto its meaning, as being outside the subject/symbolic and, simultaneously, performing itself within the scope of desiring.
Bafflement cannot exist in a return to the repressed. Subjecthood is never the possession of ontological blackness based in enlightenment humanisms and plantation geographies. Bafflement forms an ideological break with the uncanny and this particular nuance of the abject corpse. However, the corpse is politically important to bafflement. Returning to Spillers’s (1987) body and flesh delineation proves fruitful for unpacking bafflement’s figurations in relation to the corpse. Spiller places the subject-less-ness of the slave as located in the body. We might frame the captive body as corpse sitting outside of the social order while simultaneously being the suture for its ontological claim. The captive body is also a sentient being and is imbued with flesh psyche. Flesh psyche articulates the space of memory. It is through the laceration, wounding, fissure, tears, and scars that puncture flesh that Spillers creates “distance between . . . a cultural vestibularity and the culture” (p. 67). There is a distinction between entrances into psychoanalytic cultural critique (Spillers, 2003, p. 382) and fixed culturality of enslavement. Spillers further articulates: “This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” (p. 67). Flesh memory as site of survival also articulates how conventional forms of gender, sexuality, and knowledge are in fact tenuous and turned inside out. It is here that the trace memory of the flesh mobilizes ambivalent temporality. Bafflement emerges as marker of dis-ease between the subject-object position of the slave as living-breathing corpse and the undead and nevertheless non-subject. What emerges among the rubble of contradiction of the undead, however, is the sheer impossibility of it, the unfathomability of existing in liminality. It is this sheer impossibility as possibility that carries bafflement’s corpse to critical theorizations of ontological blackness as life in death, as creation in spite of violence. Given the differentiation between the abject, the uncanny and bafflement, how might we return differently to Corporeal?

It is bafflement that returns to the scene of the difficult familial through the corpse, markedly diseased and frustrated. Lawson’s photographs are particularly astute in making explicit the connection between fissure in abjection and uncanniness in order to locate bafflement once more.

2.4 Conclusion: A Case for the Canon Family, Corporeal as Bafflement

At the same time my heart felt heavy. . . . The image of Teish penetrated me to the core, and I wondered if I had gone to far . . . if I was crossing an invisible boundary. (Lawson, Corporeal, 2009, p. 34)
Corporeal's ambivalences to black social death mark a decidedly difficult articulation of the familial. It is these ambivalences that reveal the performativity of bafflement. Previously, this chapter noted how bafflement is akin to the abject both through its performative and visual strategies. To this end, bafflement lays bare the fiction of language through a visual strategy that performs an aesthetic blur. Kristeva connects the abject to poetry, and I connect bafflement to visuality. Here, I have sought to liken bafflement steeped in racial slavery as an approach to apprehend excess. Kristeva draws the connection of excess to the maternal and, later, the corpse. The corpse forms a line of tension between abject and uncanny. Whereas the uncanny is located in a return to the repressed, a return for abjection can only occur through an object always lost. Bafflement ultimately marks a distinction from the abject by making clear an inability to mourn an object never in possession.

Lawson’s collection of work animates such excessiveness through the difficult familial. Bafflement, as visual reading practice, provides the context with which to examine Lawson’s work both as difficult familial and as strategy of excess. Examples of excess emerge through the contrast between bodies against locations, the peculiar subjects presented, and the works’ failure to adhere to respectability claims. Furthermore, Corporeal functions as a collection of the abject through depictions of excessive femininity, twins, the ageing and decayed, the transgendered, and the deceased. These depictions are bookended by The Beginning and Adorah. Both images bring to the fore the symbolic signification of birth and death and the contradiction of the corpse as that which once was alive but is no longer. By way of a conclusion, I return to the contradictions of the corpse and the Cannon family to exemplify this relationship.

Moses ‘Teish’ Cannon 1986–2008 depicts a young woman in her prime, positioned against a tan wall. This is one of a handful of appropriated images included in Corporeal. Teish stands with her back facing the camera and peers over the shoulder. The right hand is positioned above the head to brace the pose. Wearing a patterned romper and neon yellow pumps, the viewer’s eyes are drawn to those focal points. A bland background makes the location unclear: hotel restaurant, lounge, and living room. Yet the snapshot quality depicts a fleeting moment, captured impulsively. Only through Lawson’s companion journal entry in the monograph does context for the image emerge. Opening with a recollection, Lawson responds to the difference in appearance
of Teish from the prior day. It is not until several paragraphs into the entry that we realize Lawson is at a funeral parlour and Teish has died. This is the same funeral parlour from which her image *Director* (2008) in *Corporeal* emerged. The written entry registers a dislocated intimacy quite unlikely in the genre of journalling. Through fragmentation, Lawson’s entry notes the tragic circumstances under which Teish died. The death was as a result of an argument at a party that culminated in the murder of Teish because of a hate crime.\(^{40}\) Lawson makes contact with the family regarding photographing Teish, and it is decided the above snapshot will stand in place of funeral photographs.

Lawson’s entry negotiates the ethics of photographing the deceased. The opening quotation signals such a concern for the photographer. The circumstances under which a photograph of Teish comes to be a part of *Corporeal* provides further pause in a discussion of bafflement, particularly as *Adorah* functions under different circumstances. A considerable amount of writing has occurred regarding photographs of the dead. Death and visuality also present considerable writing.\(^{41}\) Black dead and its visual registries compound violence, life, and death.\(^{42}\) Such an ethical question conjures a continued legacy of ways of mourning black death. I venture that the photograph, *Moses ‘Teish’ Cannon 1986-2008*, functions as eulogy. There is melancholy here. Photography is a technology of capture; documentation is morbid in this way, seizing a forgone moment, one that concludes as soon as the photograph immortalizes.

A photograph of Mark Cannon, Teish’s brother, is also included in *Corporeal. Mark Cannon and Friend* (2008) positions Mark and another on a bed or couch with blue cover and camel textured

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\(^{42}\) Scholars have written on the dead black body in media as a particularly insidious instance of racial antagonism. This work sits alongside the persistent targeting and murder of transgender people as well as publicized encounters of the killing of blacks for racially charged motives (e.g., Emmett Till, lynching photographs, and contemporary police violence caught on camera). This work also echoes the cultural inclination of photographing one’s deceased, such as in the context of photographer James Vander Zee’s *Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978).*
throws pillows, against heavy tapestry drapes. Mark wears a hot pink pants and white shirt with star and lettering, while his friend is clothed in a bra and panty set. The image suggests a familial intimacy between the two, through friendship. Much like the photograph of Teish, Mark and friend has a snapshot quality to it (Lawson, 2011, n.p.).

The technology of photography performs ambivalent bafflement. A photograph, for example, might be the corpse of the subject once photographed. It is the photograph’s belatedness, even at the time of its capture, that signals a shift between subject to be photographed and the no longer. Photographs however, have also been called the shadow of the body. This relationship of the photograph as an abject artifact compounds bafflement as a linchpin between what is repressed (familiar because of a return to the expelled) and/or haunted (always present). It is different from viewing the corpse, in that the image depicts some aspects of life—a returned stare, a bodily gesture, a wink. This difficult familial that Corporeal signals not only engages abject social life but also mobilizes an uncanny likeness to almost-life. Bafflement might be the liminal space between uncanniness and abjection, occupying a position at both sides of a threshold through its strangeness and familiarity. Corporeal presents the struggle of bafflement as one located in the space of ambivalence between a perceived abjection and the uncanny.

Chapter 3
Origins of the Universe and Otherworldly Affects

This chapter turns to Mickalene Thomas’s portraits, landscapes, and interiors to consider how black/queer/diaspora reconfigures contemporary black cultural production. Thomas’s work focuses on formalism while responding to racial antagonisms that traditionally adhere to black femininities. Thomas’s incorporation of photography and collage fragments into large-scale paintings negotiates black diaspora cultural production and the interior landscapes of the self. Fragmentation informs discourses of beauty, the sublime, and pleasure.

Chapter 2 discussed bafflement as a performative apparatus of ambivalence that coalesces in black femme sexuality and domesticity. Blackness and black femme sexuality has traditionally been relegated to the abject, to that which is cast out as excess. Deana Lawson’s work annunciates this struggle through photographs of black femme figures in everyday domesticity. Bafflement, as pause between abjection and the uncanny, reveals how Lawson’s work reorientates the expulsion of the excessive black body. Ambivalent bafflement narrates expulsion differently through the difficult familial.

This chapter turns to Mickalene Thomas’s use of social and interior spaces to consider the queer pleasure of looking thorough bafflement. The following pages continue the discussion of bafflement through an engagement with beauty, the sublime, and blackness. Philosophies of beauty and the sublime inform formalist traditions in art history alongside visual pleasure. Turning towards bafflement in Thomas’s work, I consider how racial fetishism and visual pleasure are renegotiated. Formulated as bling, the rhinestones and glitter Thomas is most known for mobilize camouflage. Camouflage, as verb, can be read through bafflement as a tool to disrupt narratives of beauty and the sublime while rethinking formalist traditions in art history. Mickalene Thomas’s reconfiguration of Gustave Courbet’s *L’origin de monde* (Origin of the World) acts as a site of departure for the chapter. Thomas’s explicit reference and interpretation of Courbet’s painting positions the artist in conversation with art history, race, and gender, while framing black femininities as central prerogatives. Thomas is persistent in using formalist techniques that centralize the viewing pleasure of black women. Thomas is not solely interested in a feminist oppositional critique. Rather, she puts to use formalism to disrupt racial fetishism while producing an explicit black femme gaze. The latter part of the chapter turns to Thomas’s
landscapes and interior spaces, arguing that these landscapes expose visual pleasure through interiority and artifice.

3.1 Provocations on Black Visual Pleasure

Mickalene Thomas’s 2012 solo show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, opened with the painting *Origins of the Universe I* (2012). Depicting the artist herself, the painting presents a nude close up of the torso, abdomen and genitals; legs spread. The remaining parts of the body are obscured, cut off by the frame of the canvas, locating viewership within the eroticism of the work. *Origins of the Universe I* reinvents French painter Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du Monde* (1866). Similarly depicting the torso of an abdomen of a woman, Courbet’s *L’Origine* emerged out of the nineteenth-century realist movements. Rejecting the Romanticism of the time, Courbet focused on painting what he could see and often challenged conventions by depicting subjects, such as the peasant and worker, who were not typically represented in painting.  

*L’Origine’s* presents Courbet’s interest in atypical subjects and erotic portrayals of the body. Such interests pushed back on the conventions of the time and resulted in ongoing censorship of the work. Unlike Courbet’s supple oil on canvas and realist Romantic capturing, Thomas’s rendition utilizes thin layers of brown paint to mark flesh. Textures from the brush linger and are incorporated into the trademark use of glitter and rhinestones to heighten contrast in the painting. Regarding *Origins of the Universe I*, Thomas (2012) notes,

> I made two: one of my partner and one of myself. . . . Any depiction of woman as “beginning” is philosophical, spiritual, and powerful. With my work, I’m the beginning. So I’m giving myself completely to the world. I’m relinquishing and revealing my most intimate self. . . . It’s about putting everything at stake and dealing with intimacy with myself in my work. (p. 40)

*Origins of the Universe I* provokes aesthetic codes of deciphering, viewing pleasure, beauty, and the sublime in black cultural production. Operating among broader academic and vernacular

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44 Courbet’s produced work experienced considerable scrutiny in its time for its salaciousness. *L’origine du monde* continues to be scrutinized for several reasons; some art historians have sought to locate the upper-body portion of the painting, while various performance artists have responded to the gendered dimensions of the work.
cannons of thought, Thomas’s work engages bafflement through queer possibility as strategy for rethinking historical experiences in local and global contexts. Thomas remains interested in formalism in painting, in part as a means to redress racial fetishism, while simultaneously engaging beauty and aesthetics, viewership and pleasure. In titling the work *Origins of the Universe* instead of *world*, for example, Thomas engages in a sleight of hand in which interiority encounters the boundaries of the social world. In this instance, the terms of aesthetic power and visual pleasure are reworked. Understanding aesthetic power and visual pleasure through race, gender, and sexuality require interpellation. In the discussion of Thomas’s work that follows, this dissertation turns to debates on aesthetics, viewership and visual pleasure, beauty and the sublime.

Thomas is most known for large-scale paintings that incorporate photography, collage elements, glitter, and rhinestones. Much of the work is reminiscent of classical poses attributed to painters such as Edouard Manet and Gustave Corbet. The subjects of these paintings are black women, who are placed alongside equally stunning landscapes. Such landscapes are intricately detailed with print and pattern, textile, and decor. A graduate of Yale University School of Art, Thomas is one of the most highly celebrated artists of her generation. Applying citational strategies of visual appropriation that perform an ambivalent dance, Thomas’s work, by referencing painting masters, conveys an uncanny familiarity. The work gestures towards the tenuous terrain of Western art traditions and the problem of racial and sexual differentiation. It is through an explicit depiction of black power movements of the late 1960s and ’70s that Thomas mobilizes this tension.

Civil-rights and liberation-struggle aesthetics factor into Thomas’s work. Art and culture in black nationalist struggles were mobilized in response to systems of power and inequality, which this material struggle sought to redress. Within the context of the United States, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) functioned from 1965 to 1975 as the art arm of the Black Power movement. BAM framed a desire for self-determination and nationhood as an aesthetic question, while the broader movement mobilized symbols such as black leather, Afros, and black cool as a mode of visible resistance. Similarly, the work of the Black Arts Movement filtered through diaspora,

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45 See Eng, Halberstam and Munoz et al. “What is Queer about Queer Theory Now” in *Social Text* for an in-depth discussion of how queer critique is mobilized and has relevance.
through the artists and intellectuals that mobilized such a practice. Thinkers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Harold Cruse, Lorraine Hansberry, Gil-Scott Heron, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange are among a constituency of black intellectuals functioning across the Atlantic. A significant figure to BAM, poet and scholar Amiri Baraka saw aesthetic and cultural concerns as sites of class-based political struggle. Baraka (n.d.) states,

The attempt to divide art and politics is bourgeois philosophy which says good poetry, art, cannot be political, but since everything is . . . political, even an artist or work that claims not to have any politics is making a political statement by that act. (para. 15)

Baraka understands art to be inextricably linked to racial violence, segregation, and economic disparity. Formulating aesthetic struggle as political, Baraka marks creative production as an important site of critical engagement, agency, and movement building. Paul Gilroy, in response to the Black Arts Movement in Britain, termed this approach *populist modernism*. Populist modernism, through the explicit contradiction in the naming of the term, suggests black artists critique modernism through mindfulness to the historical underpinnings that mobilize blackness as the invisible suture to occult modernism (Gilroy, 1988a, p. 38). Through recognition of black diaspora as the stepchild of Western modernity, black artists rearticulate a positivist core of aesthetic modernism through resolute populist terms. Gilroy outlines terms of populist modernism through five constitutive aesthetic approaches: focus on racial memory, intertextual patterns, acknowledgement of special analytic problems that emerge in such a perspective shift, consideration of the mistaken sign as reference, and critique of the adequacy of language in articulating diaspora historical necessity and understanding the problem of genre (Gilroy, 1988a, p. 39). Here, the movement enacts a Du Boisian double consciousness in which, on the one hand cultural producers are located in and of modernity, while on the other hand artists acknowledge the task of transforming the aesthetics of modernism into populist forms that are anti-elitist (Gilroy, 1988a, p. 46). The Black Arts Movements of the United States and Britain focused on conceptualizing particular cultural and racial critiques in differing contexts. At the heart of such practice was a desire to think about cultural politics alongside aesthetic questions. Baraka and Gilroy’s tenets focus on a response to occult philosophical ideologies, framed in part through Anglo formalism as the aesthetic registry of contemporary cultural critique. Baraka and Gilroy remind us that contemporary cultural politics and aesthetic questions are the after-effects of the
overdetermination of the human. A poetics of bafflement functions in Baraka and Gilroy’s assertions to critique the very contours of aesthetic creation and response. Wynter (2003) reminds that the foundation of cultural politics is in direct relation to the descriptive statement of the human (p. 263). Bafflement intervenes into the politics of black representation by acknowledging the fallacy of the descriptive statement of the human. Bafflement also stages the irreconcilable pause and unseemliness of black aesthetic creation and response. I explore formalism and its relationship to philosophies of modernity and bafflement in greater detail in the subsequent section. However, it is important to note the historical contexts of antiblackness—through state-regulated practices and Thatcherian ethnic absolutism articulated through collective British-ness—that the Black Arts Movement sought to undermine.

Both Amiri Baraka’s and Paul Gilroy’s framing of art and politics comes under considerable scrutiny, in part because of a lack of engagement with gender and sexual difference. A considerable amount of scholarship has addressed the hetero-patriarchal underpinning of liberation struggles and its implications on contemporary cultural production.46 This scholarship has sought to identify not only how women contributed to the movement, but also how gender and sexuality are mobilized alongside the arc of racial antagonisms. Furthermore, the relationship between art and politics, gender, sexuality, and blackness that exposes ethnic absolutism is important to consider.

Gilroy and Mercer’s contributions to Third Text highlight some of these tensions. This debate emerges in response to The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain (1989) curated at the Hayward Gallery, by Rasheen Araeen. The Other Story elicited considerable scrutiny from art critics inside and outside of the British black community.47 Mercer (1990) argues that


47 The Hayward Gallery is “a key site of the official national culture in visual arts” (Mercer, 1990, p. 62). Mercer notes the show was burdened with representing a body of work that has been all but invisible and rendered absent in modern art history (p. 62). As a result, a desire to provide a corrective inclusion to counter such absences backfired,
Gilroy’s populist modernism, while constructing a framework to engage race, culture, and ethnicity, results in reproducing the burden of representation (p. 63). The problem with populist modernism is that it reinforces the burden of representation by not considering the historical context. Furthermore, populist modernism requires that black artists speak for entire constituencies. Additionally, Mercer argues that Gilroy provides a critique of formalism (in relation to modernity and postmodernity) without engaging actual art objects (p. 64). Mercer’s criticism breaches the desire to identify seemingly alternative aesthetics codes in black art as a function outside of the modernist project. Again, bafflement is productive in deciphering Mercer’s break with Gilroy, as it highlights how the history of modernity must be engaged with and through anti-essentialist interpretations of black aesthetics. By rupturing the seamlessness of vision and the aesthetic project of modernism, bafflement becomes the site where black art can approach the unknowable of aesthetic creation. Debates regarding the reception of *The Other Story* can be read contrapuntally with the 1993 Whitney biennial in New York.

*The Other Story* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial represent a shift in the art canon of the time, particularly around issues of race, gender, and identity politics explored in art institutions. Critics quickly framed the Whitney biennial as the “politically correct” and multicultural biennial that mobilized an identity-based movement centring representation and embodiment as a site of struggle. The biennial—which unlike previous shows, presented few paintings—focused on largely unknown artists (thirty of the forty-three participants were new to the Whitney), while devoting forty per cent of the show to women and people of colour. Lead curator Elizabeth Sussman (1993) explained that the exhibition attempted to present “a refigured but fragmented collectivity that has been lacking in current art production” (p. 14). Fragmented identity is what Sussman saw as definitive of the cultural matrix of the early 1990s, represented in sexual, gendered, and ethnic subjects. The show quickly gained considerable criticism. At the time, New York Times chief critic Michael Kimmelman (1993) wrote of his encounter with the show, “I hate the show,” saying it made him feel “battered by condescension” and that it treated art “as if

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when artists within the black community felt people were not represented while, simultaneously, right-wing critics argued that the body of work was simply not good enough (p. 61).

48 At the time, Thelma Golden was a part of the curatorial team for the show and the only African American on staff.
pleasure were a sin” (n.p.). Kimmelman’s criticism is levelled at the lack of painting alongside the inclusion of feminist and identity-based work in the show. Yet, the evaluation is also couched in an assessment of the quality of work. Because of its reception, the Whitney biennial signals a shift in the hegemony of the art canon and forges the entry of intersectionality into the global art stage. Responding to negative assessments of the show, feminist art critic Griselda Pollock notes,

These [political, racial] issues are always considered the simple stuff that vulgarizes and distracts from the more heady concerns of form: characteristics that are ideologically constructed and uncritically assigned . . . to the work of white male artists. (Pollock quoted in Murray, 2015, pp. 115–116)

Formalism, as pure artistic convention, is rigidly mobilized through conservative criticisms of dissent to and distaste for the biennial, as exemplified by Kimmelman. These conservative constructions of formalism structure an art critique that uncritically finds merit in work and evaluates such work outside the historical context of production.

Kobena Mercer (1990), regarding the reception of The Other Story, broadens the crisis of representation and aesthetic inquiry. Much of the criticism within the black art community for the show was launched at the curator and not the art works. This signalled an underdevelopment of aesthetic response to a diverse body of work (pp. 61–62). Furthermore, those criticisms presented were formulated against the backdrop of exclusion and a delayed right to speak. In other words, The Other Story, with its focus on racism, was finally given a platform through an art institution that had been know for generating the narrative of British-ness. The curatorial project faltered by attempting to tell the whole story and fill the abyss of its very exclusion. This backdrop and need to tell an entire story of exclusion ultimately simplified the complexity of The Other Story’s interventions (p. 62). For Mercer, the condition under which the story gets to be told becomes important to the debate of representation. It is here that the reproduction of the burden of representation proliferates. The burden of representation marks the imposition on black artists to represent the entirety of marginalized communities (p. 62). Criticism, aesthetic inquiry, and the ability to think the impossibility of black art comes at the cost of the multivocal. Bafflement, as it resonates with Mercer’s grappling of historicity and aesthetic response, comes with considerable contradiction, confusion, and incoherence. Incoherence in black aesthetic creation and response is what is at stake. While the Whitney biennial put forth various feminist
and queer art forms and did so outside of the genre of painting, *The Other Story* mobilized a
diversity of works by black British artists and struggled with the space of the Hayward Gallery,
in which a national narrative of art and culture have been constructed.

Contemporary black diaspora artists continue this debate between the imperatives of the Black
Arts Movement, the notion of post-black art, and black diaspora practices. Derek Conrad Murray
(2015), for example, argues the importance of framing Thomas’s work within the identity-based
debates of the 1990s. The historical context is a portion of what Thomas inherits. Simultaneously
the identity debates suggest spaces where Thomas’s work extends beyond rectifying abuses of
Western culture on black bodies (p. 116). Murray further argues that Thomas’s post-black
futurity, while less interested in rectifying Western abuses, focuses its attentions on generating a
queer feminist desiring gaze. A queer feminist desiring gaze, Murray continues, “[presents] a
powerfully defiant and aggressively sexual representation of black womanhood that bears the
*power of the look*” (p. 116). His consideration of Thomas’s work unpacks this desiring gaze
beside the work of Glenn Ligon, Kehinde Wiley, and Kilup Linsy. His purpose is to frame these
artists alongside the production of post-black art that utilizes queer sexuality to think outside of
gender and sexuality. While Murray’s assessment of Mickalene Thomas’s engagement with
visual pleasure is compelling, I return to the precursory question of codes of aesthetic registries
(formalism). Alongside the gaze and questions of beauty and the sublime, Thomas’s work
expands a critique of art history’s canonization of genre and style. It is in this space that a poetics
of bafflement is further animated.

### 3.1.1 Bafflement, Visual Pleasure, and Beauty

Visual pleasure features prominently in Mickalene Thomas’s work. A long history of the gaze
and viewership in relation to race, gender, and sexuality are framed at the intersections of
feminist art studies and blacks studies. While I briefly touch upon David Marriott’s use of the
phantasmal look in Chapter 2, I turn now to Lorraine O’Grady’s (2003) seminal work
“Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity.” This work acts as a benchmark
analysis of the formations of black feminine subjectivities through viewing pleasure. Responding
to how blackness comes into visibility as a strategy of framing ideal white femininity, O’Grady’s
timeless essay highlights scopic regimes that align with normative fields of vision even when
questions of gender are at the forefront. As the only black woman called to participate in a panel
on the political possibility of the female nude at the College Art Association in 1989, O’Grady presented “Olympia’s Maid,” which intervenes into discourses of the nude, gender, and race within art institutions. The work has been germinal to discussions of black female corporeality, viewership, and the gaze. Literatures of the gaze have debated who and how viewing occurs and where the visual can perform pleasure.

Literatures of the gaze have discussed power and anxiety located in an awareness of being viewed. Jacques Lacan (1998) notes the psychological affect associated with an awareness of being viewed. This is popularized in the development phase of the mirror stage. Michel Foucault elaborates on this claim in Discipline and Punish (2012), whereby regimes of power regulate people, most notably through the panoptic. At the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, theorists have sought to interrogate who views and how viewing occurs alongside visual pleasure. Some scholars have located gender power asymmetry and masochistic spectatorship desire (Mulvey, 1989; Studlar, 2009) while others have suggested that regimes that structure viewing/viewership are haunted by racial and fetishizing antagonisms (Fanon, 2008; hooks, 1992; Marriott, 2007; Said, 2006).

At times viewing pleasure and spectral agency of marginal communities are almost nonexistent without intervention. This often contributes to an omnipotent spectral apparatus. bell hooks has sought to mobilize a site of agency through an oppositional gaze. The oppositional gaze mobilizes a return to looking that black women utilize to reinsert agency. Additionally, recent scholarship in black feminist studies has focused on the pleasure in looking and being looked upon, particularly in non-normative spaces where the deployment of gender occurs against the backdrop of racially and sexually charged narratives (e.g., pornography, the strip club, and BDSM communities). With a nod to this scholarship, I turn to Jennifer Nash’s contributions to this discourse to further the discussion of bafflement in the context of Thomas’s work.

49 For more on feminism and the gaze see bell hooks (1992), Black Looks: Race and Representation, Turnaround; Lara Mulvey (1989), Visual and Other Pleasures, Palgrave Macmillan.

Jennifer C. Nash (2014) argues for a consideration of the impossible sites of black female subject pleasure and ecstasy, which are often illusive in the black feminist archive. Nash supports such a claim through the exploration of feminist historical responses to pornography, black feminist interpretations of representation, and close readings of racial iconographic pornography. Nash asserts that, through racial pornography, black porn protagonists and spectators find ecstasy through performing blackness. Furthermore, pleasure in race humour, in being watched and watching, as well as pleasure in upending the conventions of racialized pornographic film offer additional sites of disruption. In locating sites of black female subjective ecstasy, Nash emphasizes that such encounters are fraught spaces of pleasure in pain and pain in pleasure. Nash exemplifies pleasure in pain through a retelling of the challenges of the black feminist archive in framing pornography as either a site of gross infliction to the black feminine body or a locus for recovery (p. 30). Ecstasy engenders “possibilities for female pleasure within a phallic economy and possibilities of female pleasure within a white dominated representational economy” (p. 33). Nash’s readings of racialized pornographies from the 1970s and ’80s bolster arguments towards the complex pleasures in racialization and demonstrate analytical potential of racial iconography as a reading practice. In discussing the 1984 film Black Taboo, Nash outlines how a group of black porn protagonists, through race humour, knowingly and purposefully render race fiction visible for the viewer (Black Taboo, 1984). Across all her analyses, Nash invests agency in the performances of black porn actresses, credits them with a sophisticated understanding of the racial tropes in which the films traffic, and validates experiences of both pleasure and pain in the processes of racialization.

A turn to Nash’s and black feminist scholarship that mobilizes illicit sites of pleasure loosens racial essentialism through gender and sexual respectability that, at times, marks Thomas’s work as a celebratory corrective to the neglect of black feminine desire. I do not dispute the work’s ability to fit this need. However, outside of reading the work as queer art and celebratory beauty, Thomas’s art might be deciphered for how it mobilizes porous ambivalences that reconfigure the very contours of beauty. Such ambivalences leak into the fabric of notions of the black art canon:

what it represents, seeks to represent, and adheres to. This project is not exclusively interested in identifications of the homoerotic in art but rather in how queerness suggests an oblique approach to visual texts. Bafflement negotiates the terrain of oblique queerness by mobilizing the visual text as a site of ambivalent performativity. Ambivalent performativity is mobilized to display a lag between right and wrong, dialect and binary. This lag signals the space where knowledge is postponed and undermined, whether through an inability to see or perceive or an unwillingness to see or perceive. In relation to the scopic regimes that structure the gaze, Thomas’s work fosters bafflement as a performative practice through black/queer/diaspora viewing pleasure that throws categories of spectorial experience in disarray. An encounter with medium, genre, and context creates sites of dis-ease and frustration. This is an aesthetic of frustration in which knowing the thing or object that causes the frustration situates dis-ease in spectatorship while marking an inability to perceive (or unwillingness to experience) ambivalence. Such dis-ease conceals the full potential of new possibilities to be uncovered in Thomas’s work. In this context one might ask, who is baffled? I suspend the question of whom and question, instead, how one experiences or does not experience disbelief. Such an encounter with confusion, alongside an inability to experience confusion more readily, addresses the multitude of spectorial experiences that acknowledge investments in both production and circulation of black cultural production.

Through repetition and the reading of strategic appropriation, Thomas opens a dialogue on beauty and formalism. Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires, 2010, illuminates the relationship between pleasure and viewership beside aesthetic modes of visual alterity. Beginning as a photograph and later reconfigured into a mural size multi-media painting (120 x 288 x 2 inches), the work utilizes multiple material elements within a two dimensional plane. Dominating the central plane, three black women sit among various textiles in what appears to be a garden. The juxtaposition of scale and medium is striking and at times grotesque and kitschy. Rhinestones are utilized to enunciate lip and eye make up, the coiffeur, and patterns on fabric. An adaptation of Manet’s Le déjeuner sur l’herbe 1862–63 painting, the women in Thomas’s rendition are fully clothed and adorned with symbolic reference to overt black power imagery. Manet’s rendition depicts a picnic alongside a body of water and forest, where two men, fully

51 I draw on repetition as a feature of performativity that Judith Butler (1995) outlines in “Melancholy Gender-Refused Identification” in Psychoanalytic Dialogues.
clothed, are with two women who are in various states of undress. The first woman in the foreground sits, completely nude, among the men, while the second, in undergarments, bathes nearby. References to Manet and other painters of this era dominate the reading of Thomas’s work. Reappropriation through the painting of master’s work is not new, as numerous artists have done so before. Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires asks us to consider ambivalences within the frame of appropriation while mobilizing shifting targets of iconographic reference. Thomas’s innovation in this work lies not so much in the reversal of stereotypes through replacement of subjects (clothed black women) but, rather, in the symbolic counter-operations of Black Nationalist imagery in women-centred pleasure that enacts multi-vocal characteristics of blackness and desire. Manet becomes subsumed under a mantel of black ontological subjectivity that is both masked through hyper-visible rhinestones and painterly collage elements. These components of the work participate in masking and camouflaging. Furthermore, through the density of black, collaged painted panels of skeletal trees gesture to a thickly populated forest among many other geographical landscapes. Subsequently a deployment of rhinestones and glitter, elements of craft and kitsch, reveal additional layers of the not-quite beautiful and the hyper-beautiful.

Mickalene Thomas’s negotiation of the apparatus of beauty in art tradition is visible as she moves to the spatial ecstasy that Nash previously mapped. Ecstasy in the context of the visual can more effectively be framed as a reach for the sublime. Thomas’s work might be deciphered for how it mobilizes porous ambivalences to beauty figurations through the sublime. Missing in the scholarship on Thomas’s work is a discussion of how the notion of the sublime, as artificial and/or not easily discernable, can emerge. The next section works through the ruse of formalism and its focus on the sublime to extend the scope of visual pleasure. Unpacking black feminist theorists’ engagement with the gaze and viewership, blackness and the homoerotic, returns one to Thomas’s iterations of a more mobile black queer diasporic gaze.

52 This work has been appropriated and remixed by various artists and designers including Renee Cox (Cousins at Pussy Pond, 2001); Jim Logan (The Diner Club, No Reservations Required, 1992); Yves St. Laurent (Spring/Summer advertisement, 1999); and Laurent de Brunoff (After Manet...study for Babar’s Museum of Art, 2004).
3.2 Formalism and the Search for the Sublime

Formalism has roots in philosophy and early twentieth-century modernist painters and emerges out of the genres of fauvism, expressionism, and surrealism. Philosopher Plato’s *Theory of Forms* mobilized the idea of edios—stature or appearance—to suggest a universal language with which objects shared a rudimentary form.\(^{53}\) Painters of fauvism, expressionism, and surrealism were particularly interested in Plato’s focus on changelessness. Unlike a relationship to impermanence where the form of an object shifted, Plato understood this form to have an essence that is eternal and changeless (Plato, trans. 1992). For Western modernist traditions of art and culture, Plato’s changelessness has translated into some of the fundamental tropes of formalism. Aesthetic techniques—including components such as composition, the use of line, colour, shape, and texture—communicate unity. Formalism is concerned with the elements of art (e.g., line, colour, etc.) that comprise the work and its relation to principles of design (e.g., unity, balance, emphasis), which, in turn, result in making a work of art cohesive. Whether realistic or abstract, a visual work of art is able to stand alone through the successful execution of elements of art and the principles of design. It is through this process that a work of art can be judged. Anglo-American Formalism, rather than focusing on the perceptual tenants of iconography, history, and cultural context, suggests a work of art is successful or unsuccessful based solely on the artist’s ability to create visual balance through painterly elements (Clive Bell 1914; Greenberg, 1971).

In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke (1998) defines the sublime as a delightful terror (p. 101–102). He is credited with being the first to differentiate between beauty and the sublime. This form of the sublime is located in the wild grandeur of nature and contrasted with the harmonious experience of beauty. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (2000) furthers Burke’s distinction between beauty and the sublime. Aesthetic judgment and taste are shaped through the overlap between understanding (through deterministic frameworks) and reason (operating through freedom).

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\(^{53}\) Plato’s application to form could be found in abstraction as well as representational works. In “Allegory of Cave,” in *The Republic*, Plato mobilized the idea of prisoners trapped in a cave who were only privy to shadows and sounds. These shadows and sounds were what they understood to be the shape of objects and forms; see Plato & Grube, G. M. A., *Republic* (1992 Grube Edition). Hackett Publishing.
outlined in *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. Applying the relationship between a series of moments of quality, quantity, relation, and modality, Kant (2000) distills several claims about the aesthetic power of judgment. Judgment of taste is aesthetic (not cognitive or logical) and produces the feeling of linking something through interest. Such an interest biases judgment and ultimately leads to various types of interest (agreeability and goodness) and disinterest (beauty). This marks a differentiation between judgments of taste found in beauty and ones associated with the agreeability and goodness of an object. Kant is clear to note that this is not a distinction where pleasure is differentiated, but is rather a distinction that marks a difference in relation to the object pleasure—a difference in the way objects produce pleasure (Kant, 2000, pp. 94–95). Beauty is disinterested and, in nature, not quantifiable. Rather, in this manner, it is identified in the form, colour, and surface of an object (p. 108). To this end, beauty is contained and bound in the object itself, while the sublime is boundless, infinite and without form (p. 128). Beauty is in those things that give pleasant feeling and hope. The sublime on the other hand is chaotic, unbound, and excessive.

For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible, and one must have stored one’s mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime—sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality. (Kant, 2000, p. 129)

Kant maintains a “safe distance” in which to construct the experience of the sublime. When viewing a painting of a raging storm at sea, one can, for example, contemplate the superior force of nature while assured of being safely guarded in a museum and not in the eye of the storm (de

Kant spends a considerable amount of time discussing Understand and Reason in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which comprise the first two volumes in this series. Kant’s central claims are to determine the scope of reason without utilizing other sense faculties and to expose the imperative of morality and freedom. I do not spend considerable time with these texts. Rather I elect to focus on the relationship of these terms, as undergirding characteristics that shape a definition of beauty in fine art.
Mul, 2013, p. 35). In contrast, Friedrich Schiller, a German poet and philosopher (1759–1805), releases the sublime from this safe distance. In order to accomplish this, de Mul (2013) notes how Schiller rephrases Kant’s distinction between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime, identifying this distinction with the theoretical sublime (p. 36). The immeasurable magnitude of the high mountains and the night sky evoke in us a purely reflexive observation of infinitude. When nature shows itself to be a destructive force, on the other hand, we experience a practical sublime, which affects us directly in our instinct for self-preservation. Schiller suggests the real experience of the sublime occurs when one is collapsed by the superior power of nature. To this end, the sublime is experienced through the most wretched of fortunes. De Mul conceives of this distinction as one in which, instead of Kantian’s ambiguous aesthetic category, the sublime functions as an ambiguous category of life (p. 35).

Kobena Mercer (2012) notes that, while Anglo-American formalist traditions tend to focus on the art-for-art-sake absolutism that engages the formal properties of an artwork, these elements seal off contingent contexts and histories as well as the circulations and reception of such art objects (p. 34). Mercer’s extensive opus of work no less engages such amnesia and anti-black practices, as black diaspora continues to shape the cultural and political imaginary. Turning to Mercer’s mobilization of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s postformalist ideals of temporality and outsideness, we might frame the boundless object in the sublime through a return to bafflement, linked to the history of racial slavery. This move brings black radical traditions into focus with the strategies of art histories. Such a focus acknowledges how modernity uses difference as a structuring stratagem while attending to how those structuring modes reframe aesthetic codes. To this end, and with some interpellation, we further formulate bafflement as a strategy to negotiate the terms of beauty and the sublime in Thomas’s work. Unlike the return to the abject, the sublime registers bafflement through an outsideness to linear time that is dialogic. Bakhtin’s idea of dialogic imagination fosters sites of interruption through a temporality that factors in great time rather than the narrow purview of small time (Mercer,


56 For a pointed example of a practice of engaging the limits of contemporary art history practices, see the multi-volume collection of Annotating Art Histories (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; London Institute of International Visual Arts) edited by Mercer.
Located in the unexpected, surprised, and non-predication of great time, Bakhtin notes,

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogical context (it extends into the boundless past and into the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all). . . . Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of great time. (quoted in Mercer, 2012, p. 213)

The casting out of the maternal repression through abjection requires that no dialogical encounter occur. Rather, the paternal component of the conscious must rely on a dialectic casting out of the maternal to figure the social self. The sublime in difference, through its very constitution as boundless, enables relation. Configurations of Bakhtin’s great time temporality occur through a return to Thomas’s representational work of *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010). In this way, the citational strategy that cycles through to Courbet more appropriately functions as a dialogic encounter.

One can also benefit from looking towards Thomas’s more abstract incarnations in *Tête de Femme* (2014) to further apprehend distinction between bafflement’s abjection and the sublime. A description of the show indicates, “Thomas explores the intricacies of female beauty through painting and collage, focusing on how artifice serves both to mask and reveal the individual essence of her subjects” (Lehmann Maupin Gallery, 2014, para. 1). Comprised of nine works, *Tête de Femme* depicts deconstructed facial portraits that are composed of geometrical cutouts. Unlike Thomas’s more representational work, the deconstructed quality of the faces obstruct assumed identifications. When asked in an interview about the assumed ethnicity of the women, Thomas (2014) notes, “It could be anyone. Anyone can bring their own notions to this because it could be them. It’s geometric shapes that come together to create a form. In a way, they are of black women, but they’re not” (para. 21). The series demonstrates an explicit engagement with line, form, and colour, alongside material to produce seemingly cohesive faces that appear to be masks. The work performs a flesh and body breakage.

Focusing quite literally on women’s heads, all except one abstraction remains nameless. Thomas productively puts into conversation an unarticulated universal abstraction with discourses of
blackness. What is encountered is a vacillation between abjection and sublime difference. Given Thomas’s broader opus of work and popularity regarding heavily representational works and landscapes, *Tête de Femme* mobilizes the sublime through the normalcy of its conception. Thomas might be read as circumventing the trappings and stereotypes of the dialectic relationship between inconceivable or excessive black beauty and universal beauty that is read through white femininity. This is exemplified by the literal figuration of Fanon’s black skin, white mask. Alternatively, Thomas hones in on the question of difference as the locus for an unattainable possibility of the sublime. When asked, “Does each work present an individual woman, or is it an amalgam?” Thomas (2014) responds, “Each work is of an individual woman, and yes, it is about the ethnicity, but then it’s not because it’s removed. It’s the visceral play, a transformation and open-ended dialogue” (paras. 22–23). I argue that the suspension of the question itself, implied in Thomas’s articulation “in a way they are of black women, but they’re not” suggests an important sublime in disbelief. Again bafflement emerges as performative strategy. The sublime in European philosophy often finds its unboundedness in a taken-for-granted universal. In the case of *Tête de Femme*, a disembodied subjectlessness is reflected through black women that are there, but are not. Thomas’s adamant articulation of this marking suggests the unattainable and unimaginable sublime in difference. Bafflement inscribes Thomas’s open-ended dialogue through contradiction. Is it black or is it not? It cannot be both. What follows is the performativity of bafflement through the sublime with a difference articulated in Thomas’s interiors and landscapes.

### 3.3 Interior Spaces and Landscapes

Mickalene Thomas has a considerable body of work that focuses on interior spaces and outside landscapes. An engagement with race, gender, and sexuality alongside beauty and interiority are often exemplified in works where a clear subject is not displayed. Subject abstraction, reflective surfaces, design elements, and collaged components engage postformalist strategies and bafflement. Landscapes and interiors function as a second layer of abstraction—skin, if you will—to the representational undercurrents of the work. Hortense Spillers (1987) differentiates the flesh and the body where through chattel slavery, with the former marking a free subject position, and the latter noting an absence from a subject position (p. 67). To exist as an object, then, is to be located at the bottom of being—a non-subject. I have spent some time considering nonsubjectivity in relation to abjection. I previously concluded that, in the case of Lawson’s
work, a difficult familial register, outside of nonsubjectivity, occurs. Now I argue for a reconceptualization of embodiment, subjectivity, and objectification in relation to visual pleasure in Thomas’s work as it relates to the sublime in difference. Could we read Thomas’s interiors as a porous second skin of interiority that reimagines black femininity through the sublime?

Thomas’s installation view for How to Organize a Room Around a Striking Piece of Art exemplifies the break between body and flesh that can be read through bafflement. The installation, posits brown wall panels, patterned furniture and textile. Design elements are placed in relation to representational photographs and paintings as wall art. Wall art are in actuality a part of earlier works by Thomas including Sandra Leaning with Head Back (2012); Michelle O (2008), and Hair Portrait (2013). The installation could easily double as one of the elaborate sets used for Thomas’s representational paintings. Life size, the space imagines the people it is populated by as ghosts within the frame. This time, however, the ghosts cannot be missed and are invited to engage the space through the presence of wall art. Returning to location as subject, The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Design (1970), often a reference point for Thomas, multiplies meaning through advice and strategies for design and decoration that allow one to “use your walls for color, glamour and excitement” for “sumptuous luxury.”

The artworks that adorn the wall form the first reference, while the space itself and the organization of the room structures relate to the “striking pieces of art.” The practicality of design is framed in relation to reproductions of Thomas’s work as a focal point to the installation without actual subjects present.

Interior spaces and landscapes animate dis-ease through design elements that move beyond the parameters of the flesh to articulate differing perspectives on identification. The use of design and decorative strategies locates subjectivity in an embodiment object that does not rely on explicit representation. Instead, the subject is representational only through indirect reproduction and ghosting. Through a nostalgic reference to sixties and seventies visual culture alongside Black National iconography, Thomas’s interiors reflect a long gone past—the ghost of time. The viewer encounters the sublime through the boundless subjectivity of the interior. I have

57 This work was on view in conjunction with Lehmann Maupin Gallery from November 2012 to January 2013. Retrieved from http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2012-11-14_mickalene-thomas_1.
previously argued that the sublime in difference makes possible the impossible. In Thomas’s interiors, we might make a case for the sublime through the very resistance to the divide between subject and object. This relationship is signified in the physical landscape of the interior as a visible articulation of interiority.

Thomas further draws on the ambivalent performativity of bafflement and the sublime through camouflage and artifice. Of the use of rhinestones and glitter, Thomas (2012) suggests they function as a camouflage that in some ways obscures meaning (p. 20). Camouflage through the use of material and layering mobilizes the metaphor of a porous second skin. The skin layer is protective and vacillates between real and fictive geographies of embodiment alongside landscapes of imaginative subjectivities. Landscape with Woman Washing her Feet (2008) pulls this insight into view. A blue sky with clouds provides the backdrop of this nature scene. Trees, leaves and branches adorn the left and right sides of the work and anchor the outdoors in the work. Details of the trees, leaves, and branches are further highlighted through the use of rhinestones. The sky is not so clear; in the white patches, clouds are rendered through various shades and tones of paper and paint. Looking closely, you may make out a patch of brown and black print. Here cheetah print becomes a speculative interpretation of subjectivity. The title of the work reveals the presence of something or someone in the landscape. A second dialogic encounter emerges to classical painting. Landscape with Woman Washing her Feet (2008) appropriates Nicolas Pussin’s 1650 painting of the same name. Poussin’s painting includes three figures, including a white woman washing her feet and a man peeping over a hedge to get a look. The white woman’s attendant, a black woman, waits off to the right. The relegation of the attendant to the right corner of the plane places such a subjectivity as a literal abstraction—a mere part of the landscape alongside trees and brush.

Thomas’s rendition renders all subjects into abstractions. The only subject that figures into the painting is the black woman, while all other subjects become indiscernible. However, what is left of the black woman is a patchwork of black glittered dots on top of brown patch. The use of cheetah print exposes a primal animal attribute of speed and ferocity that comments on pathological black femininity alongside a cool calm prowess. Thomas is able to play with racial fetishism and offer a feminist critique that looks through bafflement onto contemporary black art practice. A vacillation between the pleasures of looking and the challenges of looking at and gazing upon black femininities come to the fore. This work does not easily conform to more
traditional feminist discourses of the gaze or racial fetishism.

Mobilizing location and subjectivity in abstraction, Thomas’s use of collage constructs a satirical camouflage and artifice that both reveals and conceals the struggle over the image. Of collage as a strategy of decontextualization, African American collage artist Romare Bearden notes, “I try to show, that when some things are taken out of the usual context and put into a new, they are given an entirely new character” (quoted in Corlett, 2009, p. 21). Collaging and the abstraction aspects of such citational landscapes distort the boundaries between reality and the artificial, the original and reproduction. Camouflage blends into an already existing landscape while simultaneously enabling dis-ease. Landscapes are fragmented, both fitting into an original location and receding into new imaginative territories of creation. The real and the fictive conspire in visual art, signifying the struggle over identifications.

Relationships between the original, the reproduction, and the real are further mobilized in Thomas’s collage study practice. Here she begins with a smaller work that later is constructed into a larger painting. Landscape with Camouflage (2011), for example, represents a study of the large-scale painting of the same name. Sharing dimensions with a mere letter-sized sheet of paper, the study utilizes colour papers, photographs of trees and bark, retro wood panels, and camouflage pattern to construct a landscape. Unlike Landscape with Women Washing Her Feet (2008), the latter reveals no inkling of the presence of a person. Instead the landscape itself functions as subject. Most striking in Landscape with Camouflage is the juxtaposition of the unlikely and supernatural alongside the familiar characteristics of a landscape and sky. The study both grounds and disrupts the viewer. For, how is it possible to have land in sky and sky peeking through land? Landscape with Camouflage (2011) makes literal thematic concerns between the real and the fictive, broadening the scope of what reality holds and the imaginative struggle of possibility that the visual plane allows. Again, sublime with a difference emerges. The large-scale incarnation of Landscape with Camouflage (2012), adorned with rhinestones, stands at 274.3 x 365.8 x 5.1 cm and renders the viewer as subject to a great landscape. The grand size of the landscape consumes its viewers. The viewer experiences an encounter with the space of the two-dimensional painting, becoming part of its design.

Landscapes and locations, with and without the physical presence of people, camouflage subjectivities through a triple veil that structures sight. The corporeal emerges, quite like
Thomas’s painting populated with people, to reveal a sublime in difference. Such a relationship between the dubious projections of racial antagonism marks the black feminine body as a screen, yet Thomas is adamant about exploring this question of screen by mobilizing a further set of messages concerned with the very nature of beauty.

3.4 Conclusion: Otherworldly Affects

Much like her contemporaries, Mickalene Thomas mobilizes art history and genre in order to renegotiate the terms of their construction. Techniques of formalism alongside painting occur with a difference.\(^59\) Her use of black women reconfigures formalist tropes of beauty and pleasure while simultaneously referencing contemporary global political climates. Thomas’s work signals this tenuous relationship to modernist and postmodernist art traditions while mobilizing references to and reconfigurations of black-power aesthetics coupled with historical references to classical painting. Her use of language marks a duplicity that shows a rigorous practice of feminist critique that engages and remixes a painterly legacy as a means to dislodge racial fetishism among black diaspora public cultures through a turn to the sublime with a difference. I argue that formulations of the sublime in difference is caught between the debates of Gilroy’s populist modernism and Mercer’s reminder that language is what we have all inherited. The language of art history and criticism, often framed through formalist traditions, asks that annotation occur in order to fully engage Thomas’s work. Thomas’s vacillation between representational strategies to abstraction draws upon bafflement’s ambivalent performativity. Faced with the struggle of racial politics, exclusionary practices, and blackness as dis-ease, Mickalene Thomas’s art formulates otherworldly sentiments through the sublime with a difference.

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\(^59\) Stuart Hall (1990a) expands Derrida’s conception of playfulness. Difference through linguistic play marks difference that is not purely otherness. Rather, the linguist play of the term signals a disturbance with a fixed understanding of the word (p. 229).
Chapter 4 Pan Global Practices and Frustrating Subjectivities in the work of Zanele Muholi

In 2012, a theft that occurred at the home of South African photographer, Zanele Muholi. Some twenty hard drives containing years of work were taken from the artist’s home. Nothing else was missing. Included on the hard drives were visual works depicting transgender, lesbian, gay, and queer people from African diasporas. The theft symbolizes the stealing away of Muholi’s archive as a targeted act fuelled by homophobia and hetero-patriarchy. Furthermore, the theft attempts erasure of an archive depicting a spectrum of gender-non-conforming and/or sexual practices from South Africa and the broader African context. Simultaneously, the burglary displays such practices as decidedly un-African or as a problem imported from the West. 60 This example reveals questions central to this chapter: What characterizes Muholi’s queer and trans archive as a threat to the nation? How might such a threat to the nation inform circulatory practices of the work in art and cultural institutions on a global scale? The pilfering of hard drives reveals underlying concerns within archive studies regarding the challenges of transgender and queer intimacies and the archives’ relationship to nation in broader global contexts. Archives contribute to the vision of a national memory and, in turn, memory becomes sites of contestation.

4.1 Chapter Overview: Provocations Towards a Queer Black Aesthetic

Faces and Phases (2006–present), arguably Zanele Muholi’s most well known work, challenges the archive as documentation. Through the ephemeral qualities of archival materials, modes of affect are given further context in what Mercer terms the burden of representation. Over 240 black and white portraits of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people from African diaspora comprise the artist’s longest running body of work. The series explores the genre of photographic portraiture through the porousness of light and shadow, tone and texture. Subjects are photographed at three-quarter angles and often placed against a contrasting background. This strategy makes the subject more pronounced and focuses the viewer’s

attention. The images are often displayed in grid formation filling one wall of the exhibition space. Through collective uniformity, the eye contact of participants features prominently. The subjects return the gaze of the viewer, further centralizing the portrait as subject.

The global art market has, in part, been responsible for the works popularity.\textsuperscript{61} The number of exhibitions \textit{Faces & Phases} has been featured in raises questions regarding how art markets shape the narrative of artistic creation. To this end, a focus on Muholi’s \textit{Faces & Phases}, as the primary site of circulation within mainstream art, undercuts the potency and broader reach of the archives the artist engages with. \textit{Faces & Phases} eclipses the broader collection of work Muholi has made and continues to make. Further mainstream narrative circulations of \textit{Faces & Phases} overshadows how the work \textit{itself} explodes the boundaries of the archive as a discrete and contained entity. In actuality, these narratives re-inscribe the dialectic between dominant and shadow archives.

Such a limitation reveals what is at stake in global circulatory practices of art and culture. An engagement with \textit{Faces & Phases} as non-representative of black experience might better delink the artist’s responsibility to take on the role of speaking for an entire constituency (Mercer, 1994). I begin this investigation with a discussion of Zanele Muholi’s broader opus of work alongside \textit{Faces and Phases} to more adequately grapple with thematic concerns that reveal themselves in the work. This requires reading beyond global art circuits to what Ann Cvetkovick (2003) terms archives of feelings. My interest in beginning with this broader canon of work is to continue to return to the affective repositories that black women and queer artists deploy. An investigation into the affective experience of photographs is to negotiate ambivalences that resound among artists and viewer. On aesthetics and art, Dina Georgis (2013) explains the relationship between art object and viewer is a complex psychic encounter with memories (p. 78). Further the interpretive strategies that are put to use to engage an aesthetic text generates further meaningful ideas. Georgis speaks of the “freeing of imagination” through an aesthetic experience that “unshackles the fixities of our memories, our resistances to interpretation, and incites and moves us to think anew” (p. 79).

\textsuperscript{61} This expanding body of work has exhibited at venues including Ryerson Image Center (2014), Carnegie International (2014), La Biennale di Venezia, Documenta (2012) and Art Basel (2011). At the time of writing this manuscript, the most recent incarnation of the series was on display at the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York through November 2015.
The second part of this chapter examines two instances of circulation of Muholi’s work through the twenty-first-century mega-festival. I turn to the 55th Biennale di Venezia (2013) and Bamako Encounters: Biennial of Contemporary African Photography (2009). The biennial structure is approached as sites of curatorial struggle that highlight the importance of reading Muholi’s work through global bafflements. Global bafflements locate ambivalence in sociality. I argue that Muholi’s work exceed curatorial implication and reinvigorates ambiguous black queer aesthetics strategies that think beyond representations of the shadow archive.

4.2 Muholi’s Broader Oeuvre of Work: Towards a Black Queer Aesthetic

Zanele Muholi’s oeuvre of work is broad in reach and responds to a number of pictorial cannons. Concerned with queer and transgendered lives, Muholi draws on elements of loving flesh, encounters, and intimacy in *Being* (2007) and *Isilumo siyaluma* (2006–2011). Where these works take to task colonial and post-Apartheid archives and interrupt common-sense identity figurations provides an important starting point. The photographs engage geographical and political climates that gender non-conforming people negotiate while struggling through representational claims that often adhere to the work. Contradictions between violent and often deadly encounters are considered alongside pleasurable and joyful experiences. These lesser-known works highlight the contradictions of memory and history, ambiguity and relationality, and point to Cvetkovick’s (2003) archives of feelings and Mercer’s (1994) anti-essentialist dialogic view. Muholi’s work meditates on the new democratic nation of post-Apartheid South Africa and the struggles of imagining democracy.

*Being* (2007) presents an exploration of intimacy in lesbian partnership and makes explicit black/queer/diaspora archives of feeling. The collection consists of 19 black and white and colour silver gelatin prints. At first glance, *Being* (2007) show intimates scenes ranging from the private pleasure of an erotic encounter between lovers, to a public portrait commemorating a...
civil union, to a kiss in the kitchen. Shifting between documentarian photographic impulses to more conceptual works creates temporal and geographical ambiguities. Mercer (1994) remarks on the importance of the plurality that makes black queer visuality an effective contender to monolithic formations of black identities. Works are able to create critical dialogue among artists and audiences regarding complex identities inhabited in concrete experiences of living with difference. Mercer further warns of the risks in replicating racial stereotypes that “reposition the black subject as the desiring subject, not alienated object of the look” (pp. 221, 225).

Nomonde Mafunda and Tumi Ndweni, Entrepreneur, on the occasion of their civil union marriage, Krugerdorp Home Affairs office, 6 March 2007 depicts a couple standing outside of a governmental building after their civil-union marriage. Instead of embracing in affection (a feature of many of the other images in the collection) the two pose side by side. It is through the caption that the context of the image is revealed. Juxtaposed against other images in the series, ambiguity surrounding intimacy and restraint circulates. Nomonde is telling of the challenges of document, representation, and art.

Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg 2007 shows a couple in the domestic space of the kitchen, having a quiet intimate moment. The couple embraces with a kiss near a stove. The brand logo, Jewel, reflects in the foreground. Both Nomonde and Katlego mark the blurred contours of public and private space as a feature of particular importance to feminist photographic cannons. The occasion of union and the intimacies of domestic space move between public and private space and expose the nature of ambivalent sentiment. If the ambiguity between public union and private intimacy seems a generic form of uncertainty within the context of Western art canons, we might read these aesthetic strategies as engaging intertextuality. Such an intertextuality foregrounds ambivalent structures of intimacy and relation that are constitutive of South African queerness within a global landscape of art-culture consumption. The domestic space and pubic union mark how banal and everyday such occurrences appear while simultaneously mobilizing contention around lived experience. This is exemplified through a panel discussion Muholi participated in with fellow South African artist Anton Kannemeyer and African American artist Glenn Ligon, which was held in April 2010 at the Michael Stevenson gallery in Cape Town. Vlies (2012), who was in attendance, recalls that a relatively hostile audience member asked Muholi why her work appears in a safe white space while claiming to challenge black attitudes (p. 141). The question reveals contention between
intimacy and access alongside the implications of audience interpretation, which Muholi must circumvent. Muholi (2010) responds,

I know that I have brothers who give me a space to showcase my work, but then I don’t know how far or how safe other spaces can become. We are at a gallery here. My audience is at the station, at Gugs [Gugulethu] taxi rank, where a different mindset occupies that space. That’s the audience, or that’s the space that I’d like to penetrate. You have different kinds of audiences in different spaces occupying different positions in this country, and I happen to interact with all those audiences. (pp. 24–25)

Muholi’s polemic signals the minefield as a terrain in which to imagine challenging attitudes. The audience member’s interrogation registers an emergence of the burden of representation that artists still find themselves in. The burden of representation is exemplified by the vastly different contexts within which this body of work may be experienced. Viewership in those contexts occurs in global dialogue. The challenge of disrupting the burden or representation is in recognizing that the artist cannot be expected to hold all positions. Rather one might consider the artists, the circulation of the work, and its qualities as creating space for dialogic encounters. Further, the audience member’s question polarizes contexts of viewership as safe and unsafe without considering how different contexts create pitfalls and revelations specific to the experience itself. The challenge of encountering Muholi’s work at the Brooklyn Museum versus at the Stevenson Gallery facilitates distinctive confrontations and audience interpretations.

Folded into the intertextuality of the Being series is a third set of images of the same name. “Being” is a triptych comprised of three aerial photographs of a bed with couples embracing. The bed fills the background of each panel. Wrinkles in the dark sheets point to a geography of land and water and body. The aerial perspective marks the spaces of the bed and the bodies as distinct geographies in contact. Compositionally, no other location is evident. The couple foregrounds the image, and in each third of the triptych the embrace is composed from a different perspective. Erotics are central depicting a tousled bed, two bodies, semi-nude and intertwined. The “Being” triptych sits in contrast to Oakland-based photographer Tammy Rae Carland’s series Lesbian Beds (2002), in which representational strategies are deployed through bodies instead of a bare
bed to shape the space of the pictorial frame. “Being” reimagines dominant codes of intimacy by problematizing voyeurism and fetishization. The shift in perspective gained through an aerial view makes the experience of looking top down explicit and obvious. The image is not particularly erotic as the embrace also signals a fetal position. Furthermore, unlike other images in the series, “Being” uses representational strategies of bodies in a bed to form an abstract image. Consider a reading of the image as a constellation of negative and positive spaces. The bed, bodies, and space beyond the bed reveal layers of space. These layers of space overlay the intimacy of the couple in embrace with landmarks of encounter.

The Being series employs light, shadow, colour, and portraiture through seemingly documentary-style photographs to expose invisible intimacies that are as commonplace and relatable as they are striking. In this way, the series brings to the fore a central concern of Muholi’s work, which is to mark the jaundice side of human-rights discourse and the material realities of gender non-conforming people in South Africa apparent. Muholi calls into question human-rights legislation that emerges post-Apartheid through African National Congress (ANC) and United Nations policy, while highlighting the impact of violence on LGBTQ populations. South Africa, after apartheid, has actively participated (albeit in inconsistent measure) in debates on human rights. South Africa was reluctant to condemn the introduction of anti-LGBT laws into Uganda, Nigeria, and Gambia and, in July 2014 during the convening of the United Nations Human Rights Council, voted for regressive language on the “Protection of the Family” resolution. South Africa’s decision highlights the challenge of articulating family outside heteronormative (and homonormative) strivings. In April of 2014, South Africa’s Department of Justice and Constitutional Development launched a public campaign for state intervention on hate crimes targeted against transgendered and lesbian people in the country. These two examples mark contradiction between the commonplace and the tenuous terrain of sexuality and inclusion on which South Africa, among other countries, finds itself. Sexuality, as barometer of deviance, probes beyond the contours of sexual practices to reveal the limitations of inclusion into the

63 Carland began work on Lesbian Beds in 2000, shooting untouched beds of friends and acquaintances. Love shows up in her work and functions as a narrative of marginality and as a site of resistance, as opposed to a site of victim hood and marginality. The series is the longest conversation that she has had in her work. (Brown, 2012, “TRC Speaks About the Lesbian Bed Series”).

nation. Reading these works through black/queer/diaspora highlights the nation’s struggle to imagine inclusivity even within some of the most progressive global humanitarian legislation. Further, it underscores how inclusivity into the nation obfuscates possible modes of human existence outside the nation-state. Practices of inclusion and their limitations in national narratives rub against entrenched legacies of violence that work beyond the scope of gender and sexuality-based violence(s).

The geography of bed and bodies depicted in the “Being” triptych exposes the routes and roots of black/queer/diaspora subject formation. This geography continually negotiates pasts and futures. Transnational debates on human rights and development, which mobilize geographical space such as the Global North and South, reveal local, regional, and global impact. “Being” functions as an archive of feelings and depicts queer intimacies while noting the ephemeral quality of relations that are made unspeakable or imperceptible in human-rights legislation. The aerial shots of “Being” spatialize homophobia and landscapes of citizenship and inclusion in South Africa, while the other works in the series can be read as the pinpoints on a map of everyday experience. As snapshots of everyday intimacy and union, these images expose the contours of a web. The borders of queer intimacy move in and out of the frame as they are mapped onto neo-liberal democratic policies of South Africa and global human-rights politics.

Transnational impulses are apparent in Muholi’s work. While focusing much on the challenges of South Africa, she functions as a nomadic artist, regularly moving through global art landscapes for talks and exhibitions. The transnational concerns between local policy and global ramification are intrinsic to the work. Isilumo Siyaluma (2006–2011) speaks to the geopolitical placement of intimacies locally and globally and the contact zones of geographical and ideological concerns that make inclusion discourse impossible (Pratt, 1991). Mary Louise Pratt (1991) identifies contacts zones as spaces where cultures overlap and clash through systems of power. Contact zones can also be the “auto-ethnographic texts” that “people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with ways others have sought to represent them” (p. 35). Remixing Pratt’s use of contact zones, we can look at art objects as encounters between a series of representations. Isilumo Siyaluma (2006–2011) marks a departure from Muholi’s documentary-style photography. The series is composed of large-scale digital paintings that depict kaleidoscopic stills in red and brown hues. Muholi deploys menstrual blood as the painterly material with which she forms lines of symmetry. If you look closely, hand and
fingerprints are visible. Intricately patterned, the stark white canvas that forms the background creates high contrast with the blood blots. *Isilumo Siyaluma*, in Zulu, loosely means period pains, thus the work deploys menstrual blood to meditate on curative rape, a strategy of surveillance and control that targets lesbians (and those perceived as non-normative) (Muholi, 2015, n.p.).

The collection exposes global intimacies of violence and stigmatization. Blood calls into question respectable sex practices and the AIDs epidemic of the 1980s. Historically, AIDs was linked the disease to the loss of so many lives in the gay community. This resulted in activism regarding safe-sex practices and a simultaneous backlash to the framing of AIDs as an explicitly gay disease. The disproportionate effects of AIDs on Africa and spaces deemed as developing reveal the continued racist and colonial underpinnings of the biomedical field. This is explicitly shown in immigration policies and blood-transfusion practices. A focus on curative rape and the currencies of blood extends local practices of violence towards lesbian women in continental Africa to its global context. The blood photographs underscore the violent encounters that target lesbians in South Africa and other parts of Africa, while simultaneously drawing into the fold global practices of anti-blackness through disease based practices.

Furthermore, the use of menstrual blood signifies important gendered dimensions. Menstrual blood’s symbolic registries reference a history that frames femininity as abject, while the waste and discarded material also notes the challenges of reproduction. The use of menstrual blood juxtaposes dirty perversion, disease, and decay with questions of reproductive rights and of the feminine. Curative rape functions as an act of homophobic violence and, for some, as a nationalistic stance deployed for the sake of “Africanness,” all while signifying challenges of formulating a national ideology. The context in which Muholi produces this work—less than 20 years after the ANC aimed to hold human rights as a central pillar of its foreign policy—is itself an important critique. The new South Africa, imagined through the politics of the “Rainbow Nation” and through inclusion as a place that has shaken off the yoke of apartheid, struggles against the continued violence directed at LGBTQ people. Yet South Africa functions in some

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instances as the exemplary barometer for transition and inclusion, particularly as it is a country that offers some of the most inclusive and progressive legislation to its citizens.

*Being* (2007) and *Isilumo Siyaluma* (2006–2011) mark loving flesh against a backdrop of the national imaginary. This national imaginary is located in a South Africa that is shaking off the yoke of apartheid, developing a new national identity in the world, and bolstering the borders of the nation-state. As I have highlighted, South Africa continues to have an investment in human-rights-based legislation and, in many instances, has actively responded to global, national, and regional concerns. Still, these relationships to human-rights legislation are points of contention and struggle. In the midst of such struggles, cultural producers continue to expand and rethink the definition of belonging. To this end, Zanele Muholi’s work mines for what Walcott (2003a) terms “the sex of memory” by locating belonging and relation in transgender, queer, and gender-nonconforming people (p. 64). By calling into question contradictions on acceptable subjectivities, *Being* (2007) creates a visual code for how the everyday of queer love exists. The blood work of *Isilumo Siyaluma* furthers the point by expanding the purview to the challenges of violence and creation. To this end, nation—through legislation practices and tenuous archives deployed in support of governmentally sanctioned inclusion—mark Muholi’s work as a danger to nationalistic formations of belonging.

The previous chapter discussed Mickalene Thomas’s misuse of formalism to explode rigid boundaries between origin and reproduction, beauty and the sublime. Zanele Muholi’s representational strategies, as sites of the abstract, reveal further possibilities. By way of a conclusion to this section, in subsequent paragraphs we turn to a discussion of the vacillation between representational and documentary photography alongside the abstract. Critiques of identitarian artwork often require that representational photography by black artists be unable to reflect universal conclusions. As I have highlighted previously, such a claim overdetermines formalism as sitting outside of the limits of humanism. Often, representational strategies depicted through the black body suggest that what is viewable is racial identity, whereby whiteness can function as universal. In such circumstances, further subtexts of the photographic image are overlooked and obscured through racial antagonisms. Representational work becomes fixed and explicit in its ability to generate meaning because bodies are present. In thinking about Muholi’s collection of work, I like to consider the representation as abstract. Can one interpret seemingly straightforward representational strategies as articulating abstraction? Such work might be read
for various layers of meaning that move between contexts of reception. For example, viewing *Face & Phases* within the context of Bamako or South Africa might require us to think of the history of the passbook as a means of surveillance and regulation in apartheid South Africa. As a series of headshots, *Faces & Phases* registers the body as a site of surveillance and management that models citizenship to particular geographic locations. In the context of the United States, however, the more apparently abstract kaleidoscope painting photographs of *Isilumo Siyaluma* may cause considerable confusion regarding the codes of meaning through blood (good and bad), and the connection to curative rape may not be made without the help of the caption. If these works point to the problems faced and negotiated by the subjects that populate Muholi’s images, the way in Muholi engages portraiture, photography, and self-fashioning exceeds the circulatory power with which the work is shared. The next section continues this preoccupation with the national imaginary through the biennial. Returning to this chapter’s central argument, Muholi’s work exceeds the curatorial strategies deployed by La Biennale di Venezia and by Bamako Encounters.

### 4.3 Global Art Circuits and Pan-Global Practices

Social institutions are implicated in debates on black visual art and culture. Cultural theorists have noted how museums, galleries, and festivals are implicated in state-regulation practices and the production of national narratives of culture and belonging. In these discussions, scholars note how political legacies, interests, and policies intersect with the missions of art institutions in explicit and overt ways. Stuart Hall (1992) notes that narratives of nationhood are formed through cultural production. Art and literature form the bases of imagined communities that connect everyday life to a broader cohesive vision of the nation. Yet as Hall (1992) continues, such a vision does not represent the full diversity of a space and the roots and routes of hybridized experiences. National narratives reframe differences as cohesive as a means of asserting a unified belonging to the “great nation” (Hall, 1992, p. 293; Mackey, 2012). Eva Mackey (2012) states, “These narratives construct a body of stories and myths with which people identify and which stand for, or represent the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation” (p. 151)

Biennials and mega-festivals produce a constellation of national narratives in global spaces. These landscapes navigate the political concerns of the nations involved and the interests of the
visual artists that are called to represent the nation. The first of its kind, La Biennale di Venezia of 1895, stands as an archetype for international art and culture of the twenty-first century. The wedding of the Italian king and the unification of Italy in 1861 provided the pretext for its conception. The festival stood as a means to put Italy back on the international map due to a weakening Venetian school of painting and end of the Grand Tour model. The eighteenth-century model focused on achievements of the nation in relation to its imperial power and the role of that power in progress and industry within international markets.

Twenty-first-century globalization has shifted the scope and vision of such events. La Biennale’s main website notes a focus on research-based exhibition. Current president, Paolo Baratta, states,

> Over the years, in representing the contemporary, our curators have shown an increasing desire to place artists in a historical perspective or in a context of mutual affinities, by highlighting ties and relations both with the past and with other artists of the present. This trend has led us, among other things, to decide that there will be “no more exhibitions without archives” and to organize, for every Biennale, a conference on the relationship between the exhibition and the archive. (2013, n.p.)

The role of history, its pasts and presents, informs the curatorial agenda of La Biennale. A return to the archive is suggested as a worthy negotiation between past national indiscretions, histories, and violent practices, which inform present and future world making. Mediation between the past onto the present occurs through partnerships between the subjects that participate in the mega-festival. This relation is particularly present between the art object and viewer. Barratta further expounds,

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66 The Great Exhibition (1851) and the Exposition Universelle (1900) are additional examples of early biennial models. The concerns of these biennials were to display scientific and national achievements through imperial power and to foster internationalism. The biennial was notorious for framing progress and achievement through racial otherness. Scholar and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, wanting to subvert such an approach, brought a series of photographs of African Americans to the 1900 Exposition Universelle as a means of displaying the gains of African Americans. The exhibition was called the Negro Exhibition, and featured some 500 photographs depicting successful black businesses and schools and African American communities and leadership. Close cousins (and spring fourth among similar concerns) are the Ethnological Fairs (Human Zoos) of the 18th and 19th centuries, in which humans from various parts of the world were displayed for European viewership. These fairs highlighted differences between European and non-European populations in the spirit of framing European progression and achievement. These “Others” were deemed primitive. One of the most famous examples is Saartji Baartman, who was put on display in London and Paris in 1815. Similarly is P.T. Barnaum’s display of Joice Heath in 1853.
At the same time, in contrast with the avant-garde period, attention has increasingly been focused on the intensity of the relationship between the work of art and the viewer who, though shaken by artistic gestures and provocations, ultimately seeks in art the emotion of dialoguing with the work, which ought to cause hermeneutical tension, a desire to go beyond. This is what is expected from art. (2013, n.p.)

A renewal of audience involvement highlights concerns with why and how spectators experience art objects. The questions of viewership and of what art is to be viewed, points to a long line of challenges facing the present-day biennial. At its heart, the mega-festival functions as a set of institutional practices mediated through global concerns. International exchange remains at the core of its principles; this is exemplified by featuring contemporary work that historically has not been readily viewable in traditional museum and gallery circuits. However, much of the challenge of mega-festivals to date stems from who and how artists are incorporated into these international exchanges.

Globalization is a double-edged sword. Scholars and art critics have debated the productivity of global art events, paying particular attention to who and how people and places come to be represented. Curator and critic Okwu Enwezor (2004) describes the critical debates implied in art and culture in the time of globalization. While proponents of globalization argue that dispersed regimes of governance provide opportunity for developing worlds to finally be involved in conversations on economic redistribution, skeptics of globalization see it as exploitative and unbalanced, placing more power in the hands of superpowers (p. 148). What informs is Enwezor’s optimism regarding how art events give rise to cross-flow and cross-circulation of ideas and art forms.67

Nevertheless, the rise of mega-festivals proliferates. Since the 1990s, over 200 biennials around the world have emerged, several of which are located in Africa.68 While the eighteenth-century


68 Beginning in 1980s and 1990s, several biennials have established themselves across Africa. Dak’Art, founded in 1992, exhibits contemporary art, featuring the work of artists from Africa and its Diasporas. The Biennial of Contemporary Bantu art, founded by the International Bantu Civilization Centre, the Angolan Luanda Triennale, and
Biennale was in part a novelty, contemporary formations have had to respond to art currents in a
time of globalization. Since the 1960s alone, many museums devoted to contemporary art have
made it a point to exhibit through a global art scene to show work not traditionally featured in
gallery and museum spaces. Yet a continued focus on internationalism in the arts has brought
considerable criticism of contemporary art and the “ethnic market” that has been foundational to
internationalism’s formation. The juxtaposition of opportunities for artists to promote their work
on a global scale and the international art markets that inform and dictate the tastes and cultural
ramifications emerging from these events calls into question what is at stake in art in global
times.

Globalization, the means by which the artist comes to represent the nation, and Zanele Muholi’s
work provide my next focus. La Biennale di Venezia and Bamako Encounters provide the
backdrop to this inquiry. In 2013, the 55th La Biennale di Venezia focused on the archive and the
museum as a site of knowledge; *The Encyclopedic Palace* was exhibited at the Arsenale and
curated by Massimilno Gioni. Italian-American, self-taught artist Marino Auriti’s 1955 concept
of a museum that held all the world’s knowledge inspired the curatorial vision of *The
Encyclopedic Palace*. Filing a drawing of his vision with the US Patent office, Auriti depicted
his Palazzo Encyclopedio as a space that sought to bring together all the greatest discoveries of
the human race (La Biennale di Venezia, 2013, n.p.).

Bamako Encounters (Rencontres de Bamako), formed in 1994 through a partnership between the
Mali Ministry of Culture and L’Institut français, understands itself to be an international cultural
event that focuses on contemporary photography and video of African and African-diaspora
artists. At the core of its mission is an exchange between the Global North and South. Offering a
space for African artists to meet, dialogue, and network, Bamako provides a vehicle for

the Cairo Biennale are among other international events located in Africa. Similarly, several mega-festivals have
focuses on contemporary African art, particularly photography and time-based work. Addis Foto Festival biennial
emerged in 2010, founded by photographer Aida Mululeh, and takes place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The weeklong
festival features exhibitions, a conference, and portfolio-review opportunities. Initially established as an NGO and
consulting firm, in partnership with the consulting firm Desta for Africa, Addis Foto Festival’s mission is to engage
the international photography community and to promote and disseminate images of Africa.
introducing new audiences to photography. This approach overlaps with many of the biennials functioning in Africa, as it centralizes African art and, particularly, photography and time-based media. This flies in the face of notions of contemporary art as something that does not occur in Africa and of Africa as non-modern.

La Biennale and Bamako Encounters act as sites of precarious global exchange and knowledge production through registries of politics, taste, aesthetics, and culture. The curatorial questions that emerge and the deployment of Zanele Muholi’s work in these contexts offer considerable sites of bafflement of black diaspora art.

### 4.3.1 Archives of Knowledge and the South Africa Pavilion

South Africa has had a fraught relationship with La Biennale. In 2011, Johannesburg art dealer Monna Mokena obtained a contract to represent the country and, in so doing, broke a sixteen-year hiatus. Prior to this, South Africa has participated in 1993 and in 1995 during the fall of the apartheid regime. In 2013, only five of the fifty-five countries of Africa were represented (Meersman, 2013). South Africa’s participation in the 55th La Biennale di Venezia was a signification one. Appointed by then-minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Maatile, the Nation Arts Festival (NAF) administered the selection of artists who would represent the country. The initial selection resulted in a social-media outcry when no black women were selected. The final list of fifteen artists was amended to include Zanele Muholi and performance artist Nelisiwe Xaba.

Titled *Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive* the South African pavilion imagined a new South Africa ten years post-Apartheid through various archival methodologies. The show’s curator, Brent Maart, notes that the turbulent years of the twentieth century focused on political resistance and art, while the advent of democracy marked a shift towards the exploration of identity, race, and gender. He suggests that contemporary artists are concerned with how and why histories impact the world today (Maart, 2013, para 1).69

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69 Maart credits the Archives of Post-Independent African and its Diasporas 20-22 June 2012 conference for the thematic concerns of the South African Pavilion. Further, he deploys theoretical work conducted by the conference participants, specifically Jean Allman’s presentation “Shadow Archives and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History Writing: Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, 1957–1966” (2012), as a means to locate the central preoccupations of national histories and the archive. The show was organized around the following themes: administering the archive, performing the archive, spatializing the archive, postindependent media formations and archival absences, and surrogate collections of the African states.
It is through the concept and the record of the archive that the artists of *Imaginary Fact* are deployed as a means to negotiate difficult histories. The archive, says Maart, “suffers from the impression of the unchanging. Yet the mutability of the archive is its key strength, open to interpretation each time one looks at it (quoted in Meersman, 2013, n.p.).” Like the broader Biennale thematic of *The Encyclopedic Palace*, the South African pavilion sought to grapple with the challenges of the archive both as documents and ephemera of past and as public and social discussions of national indiscretions in which to imagine a new democratic South Africa.

Through the entrance to the exhibition space, the viewer first encounters Zanele Muholi’s *Faces & Phases* (2006–present): Two hundred portraits of transgendered, lesbian, gay and bisexual participants anchor *Imaginary Fact*. The viewer experiences these portraits in grid formation, an artistic choice familiar to the presentation of the work elsewhere. *Faces & Phases* performs the archive, exposing the viewer to an aesthetic of overwhelming that calls into question presence and representation. In the curatorial statement, Maart (2013) frames Muholi’s contribution through the notion of the shadow archive. The shadow archive culls for absences within traditional archival spaces. The shadow archive asks, what new histories are revealed and can be written from lack in nationalistic archives of a colonial past? As methodological impulse, the shadow archive apprehends absences in traditional archives by reaching for fragments. Such an approach does not simply fill in gaps in colonial archives; rather, these fragments destabilize the very formation of the colonial documentation project, pointing to “new history writing projects” (Allman, 2013, p. 120). How, then, does the shadow archive reconcile the act of absence making through what Ralph Ellison (2010) calls the “hyper-visible invisibility” of the black body? Reading such hypervisible invisibility alongside the context with which Muholi’s work comes to be a part of *Imaginary Fact, Faces & Phases* literally acts as the visible suture of invisibility, as the hypervisible oversight.

### 4.3.2 Bamako Encounters and Contemporary African Photography (2009)

Occurring four years prior to *Imaginary Fact*, the 8th annual Bamako Encounters focused on geographical and ideological borders and their impact at regional, national, and global levels. The curatorial statement discussed the porous lines of demarcation in migratory patterns across
African countries and through histories of colonization and decolonization, which informed relationships between north and south borderlands.

Relations to a perceived Other mark territories as foreign, outside, and elsewhere; borders then function ideologically as well. While borders are fraught, they also mark crossings and points of overlap that provide provocative sites of encounter and exchange. Bamako Encounters’ artistic directors, Michael Krifa and Laura Serani (2009), note, “while it marks the limit, the border is also a place of Encounters and exchanges in that in between place so rightly called No Man’s Land” (n.p.).

Borders function through transit, transformation, and exchange; they are increasingly important and paradoxical in a moment in time focused on globalization and nomadism, which implies the disappearance of borders. This extends beyond artificial lines of demarcation to natural barriers that form complex realities in current tensions through a constellation of political and socio-economic—as well as regional, ethnic, and cultural—group identifications.

The inclusion of Zanele Muholi’s work in Bamako occurs through the series *Ms. D’vine* (2007). *Ms. D’vine* features a transgendered person and questions lines of demarcation around gender and sexual orientation as unnatural or un-African. The series is composed of five portraits, which narrate Ms. D’vine through a set of subjectivities that perform and break apart normative gender formations. In *Ms. D’vine I and II*, the subject is foregrounded against a landscape of weathered cornhusk and bright blue sky. D’vine is at times adorned in a black dress and at other times in traditional beading indicative to the region. Colour features prominently in the portraits; for example, red pumps anchor the images against a bright blue sky and oat-coloured field. In one of the most striking of the series, *Ms. Divine III*, the subject fills the frame posed against a chain link fence. A rainbow skirt and red metallic wrap flap in the wind of the landscape.

Muholi’s contribution to the exhibition points to the ideological borders mobilized around gender, gender performance and embodiment, and sexual orientations, while playing with how gender and sexuality themselves are subjective. But what is at stake in holding Muholi’s work as

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70 Muholi won the Casa African Award for best photographer and was subsequently the only woman to win an award for this festival.
the border that can be transgressed through transgenderness? In other words, how might the curatorial strategy limit the scope of the work itself?

**4.3.3 Enacting Diaspora Public Cultures and the Curatorial Problem**

While La Biennale and Bamako Encounters emerge out of different circumstances, both pose problems to the curatorial project of the art object. Important to consider are the limits of curatorial strategies to engage the reach of Muholi’s work. I turn to a discussion of these limits and address how curatorial strategies negotiate global bafflements. A poetics of bafflement, through Glissantian relation, reads for spaces where knowledge is postponed and undermined. Frustration and confusion in the face of that which cannot be understood (e.g., whether through an inability to see or perceive, or an unwillingness to see or perceive) becomes the condition through which the visual text (art object) can approach the unknowable. Unpacking this further, literary and visual devices and cultural contexts and implications act to unsettle the seamlessness of the art object/experience and its language and meaning. The felt contours of bafflement, much like Raymond William’s structure of feeling, highlight how feeling is socially constructed and reproduced (e.g., return to Fanon’s encounter with the white child). Utilizing bafflement as deciphering practice not only attunes to the sociality of feeling but also deploys frustration and confusion through performative qualities of memory and translation. Memory’s performativity vacillates between what becomes the referent, what is remembered, and what is forgotten.

A practice of bafflement, then, can displace the seamlessness of pathological assumptions of black becoming by acknowledging both how the act of frustration and confusion conceals and how frustration and confusion reveals. Expanding bafflement into globality marks how neoliberalism, capitalism, and the rise in global art markets conceal and reveal ambivalences based on the social, cultural, and political standpoints of the nation and institutions involved. Bafflement—on the level of networks and circuits that Mercer points to in the writing of artist, art objects, and art institutions—expands the nexus of bafflement beyond the individual to its sociality. Global bafflements mark two simultaneous and contradictory movements. Through nationalist narratives of belonging, global bafflements function as an imposition of the national archive on the breadth of its citizenship, particularly as belonging falls inside and outside of the nations political impulse. In this instance, bafflement functions as exaltation and/or an implied
plea of naïveté, which the nation can deploy to distance it from the politics of its oppression by beseeching confusion. The inclusion of *Faces & Phases* in the South African pavilion struggles with Maart’s curatorial concerns of imagining fact, by literally physicalizing *Faces & Phases* as overlooked in the archive. Even as the inclusion of the work attempts to address absences in the archives through an engagement with shadow and surrogate knowledges, I argue that the full potency of *Faces & Phases*’s ability to imagine new futures is curtailed through its hyper-visible omission. This enunciates the first aspect of bafflement through concealment. Through national narratives of belonging, in this case *Imaginary Fact*’s interest in deploying various aspects of the archive to imagine a new South Africa, the curatorial strategies fall short. However, this falling short articulates a moment of suspended ambivalence to inclusionary practices.

While the shadow archive provides methodologies for revealing missing archival material through fragmentation that attempts to move beyond the gap it fills, the shadow as it is performed in the instance of *Imaginary Fact* through *Faces & Phases* does not actually restructure the relationship between colonial archive and surrogate knowledge. Instead of highlighting simultaneous and ephemeral presences of memory, experience, and affects, *Imaginary Fact* tethers *Faces & Phases* to the category of subjugated knowledge and the shadow. To this end, *Imaginary Fact* in some ways adheres to codes of narrative formation of national belonging by deploying queer and trans sensibilities for the purposes of a national articulation of inclusion.

Further—and against the broader theme of La Biennale and *The Encyclopedic Palace*—peculiar and stark contrasts between knowledge production and ambivalent surrogate knowledges produce further tensions. The World Fairs and Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, as precursive institutions to biennial formations, left residual traces that ushered in narratives of modernity and progress. Concealments, through confusions and frustrations, are mobilized in memory and in the overlooked. Echoing the theme of the biennial, all the world’s knowledge, reproduces the display of information alongside a hierarchical frame. Producing a space that could “hold all the world’s knowledge” would require contending with how colonial and national imaginaries rely on overlooked knowledge as shadow knowledge to uphold practices of exclusions.
Bamako Encounters evokes global bafflements of concealment by mobilizing gender and sexual difference as site of border transgression. Imagining borders through transgender embodiment requires that a border must be transgressed and that this border sits along side gender difference. The application of Ms. D’vine as gender difference and site of transgression utilizes ideological borders as gate-keeping systems. Framing transgression through gender non-conformity and, in particular, through transgendered sensibilities does not mean rethinking the terms of boundary making itself. Instead, transgenderism functions as a marker of incorporation in the nation. The nation absorbs another subjectivity into its dominion without revising the terms of inclusion. Michelle Stephens (2005) notes how even critical race scholarship focused on freedom and border transgression falls prey to trappings of sovereignty, empire, and militarism translated through gender and sexuality difference. Both the limits of the shadow archive and the deployment of transgenderness as transgression adhere to codes of nation by deploying queer and trans sensibilities for nation articulation.

Global bafflements also highlight how belongings falls outside of the national narrative and disrupts and reconfigures belonging in spite of the imposition of a national narrative. Here, bafflement deciphers what is revealed through memory, experience, and affect. This aspect highlights how being precariously positioned inside or outside the national narrative frustrates belonging in spite of the imposition national ideologies (or colonial archives) might make. In this vein, Muholi’s work reveals concerns regarding the politics of representation by supplying the shadow and surrogate archive—portraits of populations that are often overlooked or framed as not existing. On the other hand, Faces & Phases visualizes new futures by performing frustration that unsettles seamlessness in the guise of inclusionary practices. Faces & Phases responds to the notion of gender and sexual deviance as un-African by captioning the photographs with the names of subjects and location on photographs, providing a map of material life in geographical space. Simultaneously, Faces & Phases embodies a critique of the ease with which homonormativity and, in particular, western formations of sexuality and gender-based violence act as the barometer for human-rights indiscretions. Furthermore, Faces & Phases in Imaginary Fact reveals the limits of spatializing the archive, even when the desire is to highlight its mutability.

Ms. D’vine furthers the project of identifying how global bafflements occur through transgenderism; in this regard, the deployment of Ms. D’vine functions as study of a deviance
(e.g., the transgendered person) that makes visible a position of normativity that does not have to declare itself (Stryker 2006, p. 8). In this context, the thematic concern of borders functioning as ideological and physical barriers is revealed as normative. As a site of border, such discursive history and biomedical management of the transgender body require that systems and institutions mark hierarchies and/or borders—a normative borders to be crossed. *Ms. D’vine*, as the very utterance of deviance, might instead be read as creating a new context with which to encounter a work of art. Revealing concerns regarding the politics of representation and shadow archives of South Africa, *Faces & Phases* and *Ms. D’vine* enter into national and global debates on democracy, human rights, and global development. Consider Muholi’s work in the context of Fanon’s previously referenced quotation, in which he not only identifies the scopic regimes that structure and adhere to the “fact of blackness,” but also points to a future “at the origin of the world”—at the crux of which all the world’s history is formed and remixed. This is a future that moves beyond signifying objects among other objects. Juxtaposing *Faces & Phases* and *Ms. D’vine* with Fanon’s origin of the world, we can discern what is at stake in imagining new futures by asking that we not simply deploy trans and queer sensibilities for the purposes of reconfiguring histories and legacies of the archive. Rather, in order to imagine new futures, might we attune ourselves to dis-satisfaction and un-ease, or to the simple ease with which the categorization of being and life reveals new possibilities for human existence.

### 4.4 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have been concerned with uses of global bafflement and have evoked Cvetkovich, Walcott, and Wynter’s theories of deciphering trauma and memory in black cultural production. Working with Cvetkovich’s notion of archives of feeling in relation to Walcott and Wynter’s deciphering practices for black visual art, I have suggested that Muholi’s broader opus of work can be conceptualized within global modes of circulation and can be used to throw into disarray nationalist articulations of human-rights inclusion. I have turned to mega-festival articulations, such as La Biennale di Venezia and Bamako Encounters, to think about mega-festival strategies and the circuits of circulation that inform the reception of an art object. Proposing national bafflements as a mode of sociality in which the art objects reveal and conceal in relation to the national and global institutions with which they work, I argue not only that
Muholi’s work creates contradictory circulation practice but also that this contradiction, in relation to the curatorial strategies of Venice and Bamako, exceeds genre practices that are important to conceptualizing black queer aesthetics.
Conclusion: Towards a Politics of Elsewhere Is Nowhere After All

The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without being disillusioned. . . . I am a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will. (Gramsci, 2011, p. 300)

There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it. (Lorde, 1980, p. 11)

This dissertation has suggested that a poetics of bafflement provides a sense-making strategy for thinking about contemporary black visual art. I have made use of humanist discourses and black queer diaspora theory to better understand how bafflement is premised on the historical implications of racial slavery and antagonism. The implications of this refined approach to an affective phenomenon (e.g. bafflement) have been discussed through the use of contemporary black women and queer artists, namely Deana Lawson, Mickalene Thomas, and Zanele Muholi. I locate my discussion in black visual studies and posit that a poetics of bafflement provides a complex reading strategy to disrupt national belonging, undo gender, and renegotiate the terms of the emotional and the unconscious. My critique, over the course of this dissertation, considers the impact of racial antagonism on the formation of something called black art and, more broadly, suggests black queer diaspora critique offers affect studies and queer theory a critical perspective on how vision is sutured by racial antagonisms. Through an attention to the elements of the art object, historical production, circulation of blackness, and changeability of the signifier, black visual art enables visual and textual analysis that responds to the past’s effect on the present.

Black queer diaspora does not solely register subjectivities in same-sex desire alongside biological racial signification. Rather, black queer diaspora gestures towards race and ontological blackness alongside opportunities to encounter works of art differently. Encountering art objects differently necessitates reconceptualizing the master narrative of Anglo-formalism in art history. Drawing on queer-of-colour critique, I employ black queer diaspora to mark sexuality in relation to the nation as an obliquely situated point of view from which to encounter works of art. In this way, works of art by artists that identify as part of the LGBTQ community may be considered queer (in the case of Thomas and Muholi), and yet a queerly situated critique of contemporary
black visual art should not be constrained to identifications alone. Such a claim to queer identification bolsters the underlying assumption that sex and gender are stable formations. As suggested in the work of Deana Lawson, a differently situated familial/domestic space can be the site of queer reading practices. Lawson’s work exemplifies how seemingly hetero-normative sexuality and blackness is already queer (Ferguson, 2004, p. 87).

At the crux of this project, is a discussion of how better futures can be imagined, despite pitfalls of humanism that draw a line at blackness. I have focused on the underlying assumptions humanism holds regarding racial slavery and on how this relationship impacts art objects. In light of black diaspora predicated on chattel slavery, this dissertation has examined black cultural production by black women, in order to rethink what counts as innovative and disruptive to the modernist project. By way of a conclusion, I apply themes of the visual, vision, and blackness to current debates on futurity and negativity, hope and hopelessness. I enter this conversation with the premise that as racial slavery haunts the present day, future world making is what is at stake. Black temporality has emerged in the form of debates on black life and death, made visible through Moten’s (2003) black optimism and Wilderson’s afro-pessimism (2010). Simultaneously, within queer theory, polemics on queer futurity, temporality, and reproduction are in vogue (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009).

My turn to hope and hopelessness in black and queer futurity stems from a desire to negotiate the “better story” and what Dina Georgis (2013) notes as the realm where we “give ourselves to our collective memories, histories, and identities” (p. 17). The epigraphs that begin this chapter encapsulate this desire for a better story by signalling rupture. In this context, the bridge between the pessimistic and optimistic is significant to black visual archives. Given the context of captivity in which Gramsci writes these words, the juxtaposition between hope and hopelessness is not lost to theories of black queer futurity. Pessimism and optimism function as ambivalent survival, which warns against wistful articulations of freedom. Freedom must struggle with racial slavery in the present day. Black futurity cannot fall into the trap of wistful freedom in uncritical optimism. Gramsci’s juxtaposition of will/intellect and pessimism/optimism is concerned with both freedom and sentiment. Audre Lorde signals an overlap between death and life as a temporal space that overlays onto itself, much like a Deluzian fold. In the context of The Cancer Journals (1980), Lorde must imagine death at the precipice of life. It is here that kernels of possibility emerge between fantasy/reality, psychic/social, and past/present.
My reflections here play particular attention to what I call the politics of elsewhere and to how this might readily be conjoined with black visual culture. Ultimately, I argue that a politics of elsewhere rethinks the spatial divide between temporality and historicization. Black queer diaspora praxis brings together interdisciplinary inquiries into ontological blackness, sexuality, and gender in transnational spaces. In the following pages, I explicate how black queer diaspora positions black temporality as critical to conceptions of the future. To support the discussion of black queer futurity, I decipher South-Africa-based visual artist, Ayana V. Jackson’s movement photographs to demonstrate a temporal overlap between past/present and pessimism/optimism that contemporary visual art is able to engage. Attending to visual art and its implication for temporality and futurity allows for a recasting of blackness as ambivalent possibility while also expanding contours of the visual itself.

**Afro-Pessimism and Nothingness**

Given Gramsci’s (2011) enmeshment of will and intellect, how do optimism, pessimism, and the ontology of blackness rework the terms of will and intellect? Where does optimism’s possibility exist when balanced ground is nonexistent? Does optimism invigorate the lethargy of pessimism’s debilitation? How might pessimism and optimism distort, shift, and make malleable the Other? How might optimism and pessimism sit in space and time? To think of optimism and pessimism through blackness presents considerable struggle. Afro-pessimism and black optimism reinvigorate debates on black temporality after, and in spite of, racial slavery by focusing on utter annihilation and fugitive flights of fancy.

Frank B. Wilderson (2010) develops the term *afro-pessimism* as a moniker to ontological blackness and a structural position in which humanism is oriented. Blackness cannot be communicated in the face of all other subject positions. Blackness is predicated on accumulation and fungibility and not alienation and exploitation. The Marxist notion of alienation and exploitation still positions the self in relation to its labour and, subsequently, as a subject in civil society (p. 58). Wilderson states,

> Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world’s semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—“leaving” as Fanon would say, “existence by the wayside”—is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so
fashionable today, Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions. (p. 58)

Wilderson (2010) further argues that these structures of ontological suffering, formulated in blackness, stand as antagonistic rather than in conflictual relation. Arguing that there are three main standpoints—white (settler, master, and human), red (savage and half human) and black (slave and nonhuman)—the black, as slave, is ontologically inseparable from the category of nonhuman. The cinematography of the United States reflects the degree of such racial antagonisms through narrative and formal strategies. Drawing from readings of films by black directors (Antwone Fisher and Bush Mama), red directors (Skins) and white directors (Monster Ball), Wilderson concludes that the site of the film’s violence is not in narrative conflict, in identifying a problem that can be solved. Rather, violence occurs through irreconcilable racial antagonisms that make turmoil possible. Vision and the material realities of blackness are, thus, connected to an irreconcilability of the slave position with contemporary civil society. To put it differently, there can be no black humanity in the present-day worldview. Since freedom is foundational to modern humanism’s understanding of itself, “there is no philosophically credible way to attach an experiential, a contingent, rider onto the notion of freedom when one considers the Black” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 23). The structural position of the slave (black materiality) always comes into visibility through nonhuman status. Freedom is unattainable and quite literally requires the total destruction of contemporary time and space. It is through Fanon that Wilderson even broaches the project of liberation where “the end of the world, [is] the only thing . . . worth the effort of starting” (p. 339). He continues, “Efforts to reassert relational logic on the illusion of unity fail to reassert relational logic on relationality itself” (p. 341). Ultimately relational logics, a position the Slave can never signal, provide no way outside of antiblackness.

Fred Moten (2008) asks the question, can there be a case for blackness where black social life exists? He questions, “How do we think the possibility, and law of outlawed, impossible things?” (p. 178). Moten is concerned with making a case for black optimism, articulated through fugitive movements. Who bears the responsibility of discovering ontology of (the ensemble of political, aesthetic, and philosophical derangements of) the being that is neither for itself nor for the other? (p. 179) Heidegger’s (2001) differentiation between ding (thing) and sache (thing as subject
matter, affair) located in Fanon’s (2008) ambivalence to colonial subjectivity and mental disorder enables Moten to arrive at black ontology against the object. Fugitive movements and black operations, stealth and illicit acts of survival, are at stake in the impurities of a worldview hinged on framing blackness as always a site of criminality and coercion. Fugitive movements present moments in and out of the frame of the humanist project where a moment of escape, stealthy and stolen, “can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure” (Moten, 2008, p. 179).

Wilderson and Moten both draw on Saidiya Hartman (1997) to stake theoretical claims to black social death and life. Wilderson (2010) mobilizes Hartman’s deployment of accumulation and fungibility as formative to the structural position of slave. Emancipatory discourses further illuminate the fungibility of the slave where “the figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fancy while increasing the likelihood of the captives disappearance (Hartman, 1997, p. 22). Moten, on the other hand, mobilizes Hartman’s use of stealing away as an experience where the enslaved, quite literally, steals time and body to participate in elicit secret events. Under the absolute domination of slavery, acts of time and body are criminal. Hartman (1997) notes the paradox that stealing away enacts, where the Slave, as property that can be owned and traded in, also presents agency. The folding into an object as subject to its own theft presents the conundrum of slavery (p. 66). Stealing away, through illegal movement, is a refusal of the terms of subjugation and day-to-day forms of contestation that operate within the absolute power and domination of slavery. But to steal away is also to thwart the slave master’s mastery and control (p. 69). Here is where black optimism and pessimism reach an imperative crossroad and shared encounter with the very moment of possession and the possessed. Black ontology/humanity emerges at a moment of illicit complexity, where becoming exists only in the future that slavery makes. Such complexity raises the question, can a future be imagined for sentient beings where the only line of relation is in social death?

It is here that I would like to pause, particularly as it articulates a fracturing of black time and space. Could such a rupture be the possibility that black temporality brings forth?

While Wilderson and Moten draw, respectively, on cinema and music to engage ontological blackness, visual art is similarly positioned to participate in debates on black temporality and the future of blackness. Photography, in particular, presents significant insights. Unlike film and
music, which are considered time-based mediums, photograph’s inability to capture or freeze more then one moment provides strategies to disrupt linear time. Gallery Momo in Capetown South Africa recently hosted a show of new and early works by artist Ayana V. Jackson. Future-Past-Imperfect (Feb. 2016–March 2016) exemplifies a shift in Jackson’s focus on reportage and documentary-style self-portraiture and performance.71 In an interview with Jackson for Fierce Latitudes, Angela Conner (2016) describes the work: “Using reportage, performance and studio-based portraiture, Jackson’s practice can be seen as a map of the ethical considerations and relationships involved between the photographer, subject and viewer” (n.p.). While Jackson’s practice has focused primarily on photography as a static study of the body, a recent turn in her work mobilizes movement within the photograph in innovative ways. Wild as the Wind (2015) depicts the artist running. The figure is isolated against a black background that foregrounds seemingly blurry movements. The feet and billow of skirt in motion register multiple bodies present in the pictorial plane. Still motion leans on the boundary between past and present within the static registry of a photograph. As a case study, Wild as the Wind offers a multifaceted examination of how blackness becomes sutured to and evicted from categories of the human while simultaneously registering flights of fancy within the visual plane. Acknowledging the multiplicity of the racial sign, Jackson’s work might be read as simultaneously reckoning with the mutual imbrication of modalities of violence and vision that constitute black subjects within modernity, particularly as it positions blackness as the prime figure of enlightenment humanism (Copeland, 2012, p. 211). The glimmer between Wilderson’s pessimism and Moten’s optimism coincides with Jackson’s movement study.

No Future for the Hopeful

Lee Edelman (2004) argues for a reconfiguration of the anti-relation project by positioning it against reproductive futurity. To this end, Edelman provides a reading of queer ethics premised on an anti-future and against the child that is mobilized to symbolize the future. By embracing

the very disorder of queerness, an inability to reproduce, queers can rupture dominant society. In a well-rehearsed passage, Edelman (2004) states:

What the Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in which and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized…fuck the whole network of Symbolic relation and the future that serves as its prop. (p. 29)

Rejection of future in reproductivity and the figure of the Child is the undoing of hegemonic social order.

Criticisms of Edelman’s work range from the misuses of Lacanian symbolic order to disembodied optimism with little to no relation to real children. Most notable of the criticisms have been located in Edelman’s inability to imagine the Other. In this context and much of the position of utopian queer theorists like Halberstam (2005) and Munoz (2009), a criticism of anti-relational scholarship is its failure to imagine queers of colour. This subject position privileges a being with a guaranteed future and forecloses possibilities to speak to nonwhite subjectivities. Utopian theorists alternatively note how hopelessness is not a possibility for queer of colour as it leads to “epistemological self-destruction” (Freccero, Freeman, Jagose, & Halberstam, 2007, p. 194) and in other instances imagines a future that can only be the stuff of some children (Muñoz, 2009, p. 54).

Other presentations of futurity, premised on anti-anti-utopianism have been framed through queers of colour and an attunement to hopefulness. Jose Munoz (2009) argues towards a queer futurity that relies on queerness as on the horizon—not yet here. Munoz’s main premise suggests a turn to antirelationality in queer studies requires considerable reworking with regard to collectivity. Straight temporality through its injunctive of reproduction as productive (e.g., culture of the child) does not allow for other types of time. Munoz articulates queer futurity through Ernst Bloch’s concept of utopia as a critical and collective longing that is relational to historically situated struggles (p. 22). Further, Muñoz argues that an analysis of how queer belonging is performed through aesthetic practices reveals the political potentiality of queer futurity; this is unlike antirelational conceptions of queer collectivity as a political impossibility.
It is at this juncture that James Bliss (2015) makes a provocative claim, positing that Edelman’s avoidance of race is not the failure of the work but rather the enabling condition. Bliss formulates such insights by drawing on Hortense Spillers’s (1987) assertion of the refusal of the black family into the symbolic order of nuclear family by way of enslavement. Spillers draws on the Moynihan report, sociological debates on the Negro family, and the unconventional gender formations that black social death in slavery necessitate, noting how these mark black reproduction as natal alienation (p. 66). Through the natally alienated black ontological position, Edelman’s non-reproductive futurity can be articulated (Bliss, 2015, p. 87). Bliss connects the incoherence of black reproductivity as precisely the structural position with which to reckon with an epistemological violence required to undo a social order (p. 86). In this way, Bliss suggests the limits of both strategies of queer futurity require renegotiation through black natal alienation. The promise of a new world order is fulfilled neither by queer negativity that is unwilling to theorize racial slavery, nor by queer anti-anti-utopianism and its orientation towards a future in this world. This gap must be filled by what he calls hope against hope (p. 85). Hope against hope becomes a temporality that does not accept this world as worth saving. Coming full circle towards afro-pessimism and black optimism is critical to the future of blackness.

Bafflement and the Politics of Elsewhere

Ayana V. Jackson’s To Kill or Allow to Live Series (2016) mobilizes the development of capturing people, objects and animals in motion from nineteenth-century European photographers Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne Jules Marey. Within the photographic plane, instances of movement, otherwise unperceivable to the human eye, are broken down into perceivable parts. This is shown through slight inflections and micro-movements. To Kill or Allow to Live depicts the artist, blindfolded and dodging an unknown object or presence over the course of several images. Jackson transforms herself into one of Muybridge and Marey’s subjects as a way to illustrate what can and cannot be seen. Her goal is to mobilize simultaneous resistances and submissions. Jackson (2016) states,

After spending so much time digging in photographic archives looking at the multitude of ways the non-European body has been “framed”—literally and figuratively—I found myself feeling emotionally distressed. It was like trying to struggle with quicksand. The combination of discussing and defending recent
work, and my personal relationship with my subject matter, set against the backdrop of the current round of public lynching of black bodies in my home country . . . it was unbearable. I decided that I needed movement, air, weightlessness, and light. So I decided to create a series of movement studies set in the 19th century. It was my way of shifting something in the past as a way to affect the present and the future (even if only psychologically). I wanted to see what healing would happen if I abandoned the act of deconstruction in favor of reconstruction. (para. 6)

Jackson’s work further articulates how bafflement might be placed in time and space. The work identifies ghostly presences, objects to avoid, sight and nonsight and embodiment alongside a series of movements through space that is not entirely predicated on the boundaries that form the photographic assemblage itself. A poetics of bafflement, as a call to be baffled, imagines spaces of complication, contestation, and ambivalence that hold the tension between violence and creation. Turning to the ontological claims of black diaspora art rather than its sociological imprint, one sees how the work identifies and dis-identifies with the context of its production. A poetics of bafflement furthers the work of conceiving the possibilities of a politics of elsewhere. Drawing from queer futurity discourses, elsewhere grapples with the complexities of transatlantic slavery and black visuality.

A politics of elsewhere calls upon figurations of time and place to imagine temporality with a difference. Elsewhere marks a site of impossible possibility, through formal and temporal disruption, that functions on the level of the emotive and the theoretical to resist narration and qualitative description. “What might I become, insofar as . . . ? To the extent that the I signs itself ‘elsewhere,’ represents itself beyond the given the onus of becoming boomerangs” (Spillers, 1996, p. 713). A return to Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) reading of temporal geography through black femininity proves instructive here. Given the circumstances of her enslavement, Harriet Jacobs finds a place to hide in the garret of her grandmother’s cabin, and remains there for seven years, among overlapping spatial geographies of the plantation from which she seeks to escape. This not-quite space, to use Spillers’s term, is where McKittrick summons black femininity through and beyond the garret (McKittrick, 2006, p. 61; Spillers, 1987, p. 77). To McKittrick, garresting, as verb, signals unresolved impacts that black women’s bodies have and do not have on traditional framings of geographical landscape. In this way, space as we might understand it is
reshaped, particularly as black women’s stories rest on the not-quite spaces of displacement (McKittrick, 2006, p. 61). A politics of elsewhere requires that—instead of simply suggesting future is not enough or the time of futurity has not yet happened—temporality, much like the Deluzian fold, needs be imagined with spatial differentiation. This is not to say that a reconfiguration of temporality occurs outside of history. But rather, to Ferguson’s point, history requires “recruiting previously excluded subjects into a nationalist regimen can be a way of using time to unmake forms of nonnationalist relationality” (Freccero, Freeman, Jagose, & Halberstam, 2007, p. 185).

By way of detour through black queer futurity debates, a politics of elsewhere clarifies the impact of future, temporality, and space on ontological blackness. In the scope of this dissertation, a negotiation with Moten and Wilderson’s positions is a tenuous consideration. There is the implication that the world as we know it cannot exist because of the structural position of the slave. Also present are pressing material realities of state incarceration, police violence, and poverty that are at stake in any project of liberation.

In this dissertation I have sought to contribute to black diaspora praxis that draws insight from visual art and culture, theories of affect, and psychoanalysis. A level of skepticism in the applicability of psychoanalysis and theories of affect to ontological blackness has served as a backdrop to this work. Compelled by emotive investments, I have advocated that theories of the visual are important to rethinking the impossible possibilities of blackness. To augment an understanding of the relationship between ontological blackness and fields of vision, I began this study with a consideration of racial slavery as a priori of black diaspora praxis. This genealogy has been instrumental to the development of a practice of bafflement. Recognizing ambivalence and frustration as a viable site of affective and theoretical inquiry has strengthened a critique of ontological blackness. Further, it has enhanced connections to how aesthetic creation and response generate supple sites with which to work through social implications of racial antagonism.
References


Spillers, H. J. (1996). All the things you could be by now, if Sigmund Freud’s wife was your mother: Psychoanalysis and race. *Boundaries, 23*(3), 75–141.


Appendix: List of Artists and Artworks

Chapter 2: Performing Bafflement: The Everyday, the Erotic, and the Abject


Note: A selection of Lawson’s *Corporeal* works may be viewed at

http://www.lightwork.org/archive/deana-lawson-corporeal/

**Chapter 3: Origins of the Universe and Otherworldly Affects**

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Thomas, Mickalene. (2012). *Landscape with Woman Washing her Feet* [Rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel]. Courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery,


**Chapter 4: Pan Global Practices and Frustrating Subjectivities in the Work of Zanele Muholi**


Conclusion: Towards a Politics of Elsewhere is Nowhere After All
