SENSES AND SIGHTS OF DISPOSSESSION: 
CONTEMPORARY TALES OF THE BLACK DIASPORA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A dissertation presented

By

Asimina Ino Nikolopoulou

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines how women authors and visual artists forgo restrictions of genre and engage in an alternative archival practice to narrate dispossession in the contemporary moment. Specifically, my work explores the ways in which these authors and visual artists engage in an affective storytelling that unsettles hierarchal divisions of genre, citizenship, and belonging. Using a transnational and hemispheric comparative approach, the four chapters of my dissertation examine acts of resistance against dispossession across different genres. I argue that these writers and artists serve as alternative archivists, harnessing the senses and intimacies often obscured in the archive. In so doing they manage to unsettle the idea of the archival subject as sovereign, liberal, and autonomous—a view consistent with the principles of enlightenment—and prove that subject positions in the archive are always already racially hierarchized. I argue that by rejecting cognition and sentimental sympathy as a mode of engagement with the other, and by turning to affect as visceral feeling and sentience, they manage to excavate emancipatory narratives that counter the hegemonic stratification of the archive. This project shows that the distinction between empathic identification and sentience is crucial for the emergence of ethical witnessing and for the production of a counter-archive that contests historical narratives permeated by white hegemonic or colonial logics.
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Introduction

“Sensory Twists and Affective Turns in the Archive”

“Whose house is this? Whose night keeps out the light in here? Say, who owns this house? It’s not mine. I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter. With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats; of fields wide as arms open for me. This house is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?”

-Home, Toni Morrison

In her novel Home, Toni Morrison confronts the readers with a provocation as she contemplates the imaginary and material foreclosures of belonging. The speaker here engages in a meditative practice, addressing the assumed familiarity of the homely surroundings, the palpable material signposts that embalm one’s existence within the space of domesticity. The modest lyricism of this segment, its sober tone and the oscillation between this which is, and that which could have been, presents the readers with a lamentation for the incommensurate relations between conflicting imaginaries of belonging.

Questions of citizenship and belonging, or conversely of displacement and dispossession, stir epistemological queries in contemporary literature written by women of color and raise concerns about how our lived environments and the historical archive reflect our place in the world. In the short excerpt above, Morrison emphasizes the affective dimensions of space. From sight to taste and from taste to touch, home is depicted as feeling, a sensory perception that validates one’s inclusion or exclusion from a space that is imagined as a site of belonging. The moment of cognitive dissonance that the narrative voice reflects upon, “whose house is this…why does its lock fit my key?”, signifies the unbelonging evident in the geographies and topologies that historically dispossessed populations traverse.
In this project, I examine how women writers and visual artists forgo restrictions of genre and engage in an alternative archival practice to narrate dispossession in the contemporary moment. Specifically, my work explores the ways in which these authors and visual artists engage in an affective storytelling that unsettles hierarchal divisions of genre, citizenship, and belonging. I argue that these writers and artists serve as alternative archivists, harnessing the senses and intimacies often obscured in the archive. In so doing they manage to unsettle the idea of the archival subject as sovereign, liberal, and autonomous—a view consistent with the principles of enlightenment—and prove that subject positions in the archive are always already racially hierarchized. I argue that by rejecting cognition and sentimental sympathy as a mode of engagement with the other, and by turning to affect as visceral feeling and sentience, we manage to excavate emancipatory narratives that counter the hegemonic stratification of the archive. This project shows that the distinction between empathic identification and sentience is crucial for the emergence of ethical witnessing and for the production of a counter-archive that contests historical narratives permeated by white hegemonic or colonial logics.

Using a transnational and hemispheric comparative approach, the four chapters of my dissertation examine acts of resistance against dispossession across different genres. In the first chapter, I reflect on the transatlantic slave trade, emancipation and the afterlives of slavery as presented in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*. In the second chapter, I examine monumentality and emblematicity as decolonizing practices in Brazil and the Caribbean through *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Pagoda* by Patricia Powell. My third chapter focuses on immigration imaginaries and the emergence of a transnational double consciousness in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Finally, my fourth chapter traces the ways in which women in the Middle East reclaim authorship over their life narratives against totalitarian
regimes, from the work of Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis* to the contemporary use of social media platforms and documentary media by women of the Syrian Refugee Crisis. I revisit these sites of resistance to look into the texts’ decolonizing practices, arguing that there is a genealogical connection between these revolutionary terrains, specifically located in the ways in which these testimonies unfold through an affective engagement with the history of subjugation under global capitalism. In my project, I trace these testimonies across different genres and media to offer a theoretical model for an ethics of witnessing and curation that resists precarious empathetic terrains. Finding biopolitics and psychoanalysis limited in their scope, I turn to critical race theory and feminisms of color critique and argue that these prisms allow for the emergence of an alternative epistemological approach against the ruses of racial capitalism and neoliberalism.

In my work, I argue that contemporary narratives of dispossession perform an epistemological shift that transposes an emphasis on cognition to one on affect. As Saidiya Hartman notes, sound, touch, and affect engender an alternate way of understanding race and gender formation, and procure “different definitions of subjectivity and a remapping of power and agency.” This project demonstrates how women writers evoke affective structures in their work and subsequently explore how these structures function on the receptive end: how they problematize the readers’ understanding of dispossession and the attainability of redress. Specifically, I am thinking about the ways in which visual, haptic, and auditory clues generate a rich sensorium that allows the reader to experience the story in an affective register, and in so doing to disengage from cognitive functions that often conflate identification with empathy. In Morrison’s *Beloved* for instance, the reader is immersed through the physical embodiment of the main character in a narrative where the perils of enslavement appear to be palpably present. Slavery is not relayed through a sentimentalist narrative that appeals to the logic or morality of
the reader as a means to procure their abolitionist affinity; rather, the author offers an alternative record of the story through visual perception, sound and touch. In doing so, Morrison sets to dismantle the ways in which the genre of the slave narrative is permeated with white hegemonic privilege, and to foreground her story from the viewpoint of blackness.

In this project, I also highlight the connection between dispossession and embodiment in postmodern theory. The body as sign, spectacle, performance or simulacrum, is crucial to how postmodern subjects experience their condition. Through its corporeality the subject embarks on an ontological quest, that is fulfilled, or more often than not nullified, through the visual plane and the soundscape that contains it. However, the sensory stimuli that one acquires from the visual field are deceptive and contingent on predatory social schemas. In The Repeating Body, Kimberly Juanita Brown invents the concept of the afterimage, “an ocular residue…with a profound ability to linger” to address how visuality is both tethered to and complicit with these social schemas. (14). The afterimage according to Brown lingers in “the architectural structures built for the system to self-proliferate…[therefore perpetuating] the visuality of hegemony” (14). In order to explore how narratives of dispossession are verbalized and visualized, it is first crucial to consider how the enactment of violence comes into being in contemporary texts, for it is the perpetration of violence that procures the resonance of the afterimage.

Violence is verbally and visually palpable, the physical imposition of a force that is detrimental and ruinous; dispossession on the other hand oscillates between visibility and invisibility. In Dispossession: the Performative in the Political, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou define the term as the “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability” (2). The extensive list they offer for what those powers might be
includes instances such as “loss of land and community; ownership of one’s living body by another person, as in histories of slavery; subjection to military, imperial, and economic violence; poverty, securitarian regimes, biopolitical subjectivation, liberal possessive individualism, neoliberal governmentality and precaritization” (Butler and Athanasiou 2). What this lists makes evident is the fact that these powers might not always be visible on the human body, or at least not until their aftermath is registered after chronic exposure. The impact of these forces are nonetheless palpable, thus narratives of dispossession present their authors with an arduous challenge; to visually represent that which is not there. In other words, in order to account for dispossession it is essential that we first find a way to animate the void that is left behind, the void that circumscribes what has been forcefully excised.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman draws attention to the violence that inaugurates the subject’s realization of dispossessed status. Recounting Frederick Douglass’ narration of Aunt Hester’s torture, Hartman argues that it is through affect, instigated by the act of telling, that the enslaved subject becomes aware of his limited agency. Hartman refuses to reproduce Douglass’s description of the beating to protest the “ease with which such scenes are usually iterated and the casualness with which they are circulated” (3). However, it is important to note that it is not merely the text that Hartman resists but also the spectacle that the text brings to life. Through its pornographic nature both the author and the reader acquire their positionality in the context of enslavement. “Rather than inciting indignation,” Hartman writes, these scenes “often immure us to pain by virtue their familiarity” (3). The “terrible spectacle” that Douglass puts into words, comes once more to life in the minds of the readers, where lasting assumptions about the humanity and agency of the enslaved victims, and the readers themselves, are created: “the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be
under the brutal power and authority of another,” Hartman argues (3). As a result, witnessing appears to be an ocular act; one that can be put into words, but also one that can be conjured from them.

My work explores the varied subject positions visuality and economies of affect engender in narratives of dispossession. I am particularly interested in exploring how one encounters or constructs such narratives while avoiding reductionist or essentialist tropes that conflate empathy with ethical witnessing. As Hartman insightfully points out, in narratives of dispossession, “at issue … is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4). Visuality, along with a multivalent sensorium that narratives of dispossession encompass, prove to be a generative lens for the exploration of loss and disenfranchisement; however, it is important to keep in mind the complications of how those narratives are construed, circulated and recorded afresh. Affect and empathy are not and should not be considered identical processes. My work engages with both and traces a genealogical relation in the ways in which affect and empathy are used interchangeably in such narratives. I argue that drawing the distinction between these two has given rise to the emergence of hybrid genres, such as graphic memoirs, and triggered the historical development of others, such as slave narratives. What is more important, it is the distinction between the two that has drawn attention to the perils of identification, the othering of populations in crisis, and their subsequent categorization along an axis of lesser humanity than Western humanity.

Critics such as Judith Butler and Christina Sharpe emphasize the politics of socially constructed grievable bodies, bodies which are defined by their prolonged exposure to “the weather,” “the singularity” of systemic vulnerability (Sharpe 131). To counter the narrative foreclosure of redress in their works, contemporary writers refuse to identify their subjects with
the violence inflicted upon them or the dispossession they endured. Instead of relying on colonial archives or conjurings of the white national imaginary, which render their subjects vulnerable, they curate an affective storytelling that immerses the reader in the plot. The sensory blurring that emerges from the synaesthetic excess of the text often creates a curious effect on the reader, who feels at once surrounded and removed from the world of the book. In NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* for instance, the readers are immersed in the soundscape and the visual plane of the narrative only to discover the impossibility of legible redress that it engenders.

In *Empathic Vision*, Jill Bennett discusses affect, the manifestation of a bodily reaction to aural or verbal stimuli, and its intersection with trauma and cultural memory. Bennett argues that affect often emerges as a spontaneous reaction, but notes that this does not mean that “the registration of sensation on an embodied affectivity [is] reduced to the dynamic of a mechanistic-stimulus response trigger.” Rather, she resumes, “if the effects of the image may be shaped by narrative and mitigated by a range of bodily responses the concentration of feeling sensation…ultimately renders perception itself the object of inquiry (43).” Bennett argues that, despite the instinctive reflex that affect instigates, an attentive reader gains insights about how information is gathered and processed. This exercise in heuristics becomes a useful framework for this project, as the epistemological shift that I suggest happens in contemporary writing does not aim to produce a single possible validating outcome. In *Beloved* for example, it is evident to the reader that the symbolic embodiment of the main character aims to animate the void left behind by the atrocities of enslavement. However, we are encouraged to resist rigid demarcations between right and wrong, good and evil. We witness the infanticide, engage in an intradiegetic discourse, and become acutely aware of the visual lexicon that codifies the characters’ perception; nonetheless, the use of the visual is not to signify that seeing gives access to the
truthfulness of events. It is rather the precariousness that characters experience which shapes their understanding of how their world operates. In this way, and similar to Hartman who is concerned with the ways traumatic images “immure us to pain,” Bennett explores the controversial relation of visuality and affect and argues that the “visual language of trauma and the experience of conflict and loss” are inextricably related. Consequently, Bennett does not only reflect on the mechanisms that enable the production and internalization of trauma, but is also invested in examining the sociocultural apparatuses that appropriate or silence traumatic testimony, thus turning dispossession into a normative condition that remains unaccounted for.

Writers such as Claudia Rankine, whose Citizen: an American Lyric sheds light on microaggressions in contemporary domains both public and private, ponder the construction of a counter-archive that accounts for the omissions and systematic erasure of non-white experience. The possibility for the emergence of such an archive is nonetheless an arduous task. In An Archive of Feelings, Ann Cvetkovich notes that, “trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them,” and that consequently it “challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive” (7). Cvetkovitch further argues that, due to the dismantling effect of trauma, record keeping is virtually impossible: “trauma puts pressure on the conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration” while at the same time engenders “new forms of monuments, rituals and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics.”

My work illustrates how contemporary writers and visual artists working on narratives of dispossession construct an alternative archive of lived experience through visuality and affect; a palimpsestic archive that offers impetus for the possibility of redress. In Ghostly Matters, Avery Gordon claims that, “questions of narrative structuring, constructedness, analytic standpoint, [as
well as] historical provisionality of claims to knowledge direct [our attention] to the ways in which our stories can be understood as fictions of the real” (11). According to Gordon, our effort to make sense of the world is predicated on our commitment to construct narratives that rationalize and therefore validate our existence. For feminist scholars of color in particular, acquiring the vocabulary to articulate these concerns is crucial. As Gordon resumes, “feminism’s presumed…relationship to postmodernism rests on its participation in the critique of the transparency of language, objective causality…and so on, all of which are part of the parcel of the so called crisis in representation.” This crisis of representation affects the ways in which identification hijacks empathy and consequently the ways in which empathy is generated and dispensed across a series of representational categories. As a result, empathy, even if crucial as a function of the human psyche, becomes perilous when obtained through uncritical identification. To resist this essentialist rendering of empathy that often serves as a palliative method to assuage the conscience of the West, an ethical engagement with narratives that offer testimony needs to be developed. Butler writes that “…it would not be a sufficient politics to embrace vulnerability or to get in touch with our feelings, or bare our fault lines as if that might launch a new mode of authenticity or inaugurate a new order of moral values or a sudden and widespread outbreak of ‘care’” (VR 25). Instead, we need to focus our efforts on the development of critical vocabulary, on a critical engagement with the emerging counter-archives and on the acknowledgment of the necessity for a new sensory hermeneutics.
Retrieval and the Question of Recovery

Second wave feminists and other scholars have long focused on the recuperation of narratives omitted from colonial and white hegemonic archives. These testimonies, silenced at best, at worst inferred through the contextual clues that existent archives allow us to reconstruct with some certainty, offer a glimpse into the disenfranchised lives of those on the periphery of historical production.

In her essay *History Hesitant*, Lisa Lowe alerts us to the limits of recovery. According to Lowe the attempt to recover testimonies pushed to the margins of history comes with the curtailed promise of freedom and emancipation. In a closer look, the valences of recovery need to be carefully examined to assess the possibility for reparation and redress. Lowe writes, “the questioning of recovery…combines the desire for freedom and a reckoning with the conditions of its foreclosure…”, but often appears to obscure the fact that “slavery was not an aberration of American democracy but its central contradiction” (HH 85). What Lowe emphasizes in this segment is that justice attained through recovery alone is an ahistorical hope, premised on the refusal to account for the interlocking web of unfreedoms generated and perpetuated in the New World.

As theorists such as Laura Doyle, and Immanuel Wallerstein have argued among others, colonialism and modernity are processes that go hand in hand. Lisa Lowe also reminds us that the emergence of the liberal subject in Europe is concurrent with and predicated upon the growth of colonization, enslavement and indenture across the globe. Lowe writes that “…liberal universalism effects principles of inclusion and exclusion; in the very claim to define humanity, as a species or as a condition, its gestures of definition divide the human and the nonhuman,
classify the normative, and pathologize deviance.” Additionally she argues that “strategies elaborated in slavery, such as possession, property, and profit through deterritorialization and dehumanization, are rearticulated to form the modus operandi of empire and racial capitalism” (HH 92). This dual transformation, on the one hand of the male European and therefore “liberal” subject to free, bourgeois, and in possession of civil rights; and on the other hand, of the non-white, non-European, colonial subject to the exploited sub par counterpart, provides evidence that New World freedoms are stratified along gender, ethnic and racial divides, which are central to the perpetuation of systemic injustice to this day. As Lisa Lowe further notes,

…the concept of freedom is not self-evident.; it was and is both fragile and contested in relation to the varieties of communities it affirms, disciplines and divides…liberal forms of political economy, culture, subject, state, and society propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the seizure of lands from native peoples, and develops freedoms for man in modern Europe and North America, while relegating other to geographical and temporal spaces that are constituted as backward, uncivilized, and unfree. (HH 89)

In Lowe’s analysis settler colonialism and dispossession are imbricated processes, relying upon the their interlocking fulfillment for the perpetration of chronic and systemic injustice.

The historical resonance of this exchange is etched in the white hegemonic imaginary, and therefore complicates questions of redress in the aftermath of archival recovery. In In the Wake: on Blackness and Being, Christina Sharpe suggests that,

in the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed overtime and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond. But slavery was not singular; it was rather a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to
occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not
make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. (106)
The reluctance to discuss the structural conditions of these unfreedoms along the lines of race,
gender, and class, explain why resonances of those injustices in contemporary times constitute
what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlife of slavery, “skewed life chances, limited access to health
and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (qtd in Sharpe 15).
Following Hartman, Lowe also points out that “a range of contemporary critics asks if one can
even consider slavery a past condition; in light of the continuing captivity expropriation,
disposability, and fungibility of black communities they ask if slavery can be treated as a
historical object that is completed or overcome, from which recovery would be possible” (HH
86). Similarly, Christina Sharpe writes that archival work is important for “plotting, mapping,
and collecting …the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and [for] tracking the
way we resist, rupture and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.”
(13). This singularity of slavery and the unfulfilled promise of emancipation, Sharpe maintains,
brings forth “black resistances and refusals,” that shape the ways in which the archive is
reconstituted (124).

Epistemologies of the Archive

Going back to the reconstruction of a counter-archive that animates the silences and omissions of
the extant colonial archives, I return to Cvetkovich, and her engagement with the ways in which
trauma complicates the process of recuperation. In a public sphere saturated with white
hegemonic privilege, how do we excavate the testimonies that remain undiscovered, not yet
stumbled upon? How do we shape what is intentionally left shapeless, what was never given space to unravel with legitimacy and purpose?

Critics such as Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe and Lisa Lowe argue for the importance of looking away from the colonial archive and into the forms of cultural production that dispossessed people historically engage in. In the *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy accounts collectively for a transnational black diasporic culture, the contours of which are defined and constantly expanded in music through time. In *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman engages with the visual, sonic and haptic worlds that black culture emerges from, covering a vast terrain of performances and physical sites that attest to the experience of black life under slavery and in its aftermath. In *In the Wake*, Sharpe looks into images, poems, and prose that constitute what she calls the “wake,” the prolonged reckoning with the violence of slavery, and all of which in turn contribute “toward understanding how slavery’s continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic and material dimensions of black non/being as well as black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and interruption” (20). Her impetus, to resist the recognition of “antiblackness as total climate,” is predicated upon the “insistent black visual sonic resistance to [the] imposition of non/being,” as she argues (21). In the *Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe traces commercial exchanges of material goods that catalyze and are in turn shaped by historical events and international treaties, showing how previously undiscovered connections produce a more nuanced historical understanding of colonial exchange.

Revisiting these sites of lived experience in the periphery of the colonial archive offers the opportunity for the emergence of alternative testimonies “that provide other versions of personhood and society, history and justice, pleasure and possibility” as Lowe suggests ( HH
This objective of recuperative work, engenders an epistemological shift that is crucial not only to our engagement with the archive, but also to our effort to reconstruct how historical narrative should be recorded based on a democratic, pluralistic model. More significantly turning to the cultural artifacts that often elude the archive contributes to the process of decolonization, or as Sharpe indicates of “how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme, with their and our, knowable lives” (50).

Decolonizing the archive is an ambitious task, as its epistemic and disciplinary scaffolding is constructed to foster an ordering of relations that is a priori hierarchical. Drawing from Spivak’s contention that the “the subaltern cannot speak without the thought of the elite”, Hartman writes in Scenes of Subjection that “…reconsidering the meaning of freedom entails looking critically at the production of historical narratives since the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the emplotment of history” (SS 10).

Similarly, in Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance, Ann Laura Stoler reflects on the archives not as repositories of historical certainties, but rather as “epistemological experiments [and] technologies of rule.” Following Foucault’s warning on the regulatory function and monumentality of the archive, Stoler notes that studies on diaspora and postcolonialism challenge archival legitimacy by questioning archive as method, and simultaneously, “ask a similar set of historical questions about accredited knowledge and power - what political forces, social clues, and moral virtues produce qualified knowledges that in turn disqualified other ways of knowing, other knowledges” (95). Stoler places emphasis on the potent affective connections that emerge from the archive, and explains why it is important to
commence the effort for a new ethics of archival curation from affect. She notes, “colonial states and their authorities, not unlike metropolitan ones, had strong motivation for their abiding interest in the distribution of affect and a strong sense of why it mattered to colonial politics… as “affective knowledge was at the core of political rationality in its late colonial form” (102). The affective economies that emerge are indicative of the colonial apparatus’s investment in monitoring, control and oppression. Stoler writes that, “colonial modernity hinged on a disciplining of one’s agents, on a policing of the family, on Orwellian visions of intervention, in the cultivation of compassion, contempt and disdain,” pointing out that the exertion of negative emotive impact on the colonial subjects was a colonial fabrication designed for their subjugation (102). In so doing, Stoler joins critics such as Jack Halberstam, and Jose Esteban Munoz, in reiterating the concern for an archive that does not merely reflect the affective economies that emerge from the complex exchanges between public and private life, but starts the decolonial process of developing a pluralistic and intersectional counter-archive there. This archive would allow us to trace the resonances of these affective economies in the contemporary moment by revealing the genealogical undertows of present day disposessions and systemic injustices.

**Dispossession, Vulnerability, and Curatorial Ethics**

Butler and Athanasiou’s rubric in *Dispossession* is helpful in considering the over-locking forms of dispossession that engulf certain populations in precariousness. However, defining these populations as well as the injustice and violence inflicted upon them, naming them and exposing
them to scrutiny, enforces a hierarchical scaffolding similar to that of the archive. The often non-tactile distinction between the mishap that befalls one, and the assumption that mishap is their identificatory marker is a conundrum critics face with growing concern. How does one emerge from the nominal space of vulnerability without being identified in the long duree as vulnerable? In other words, how does one retain their agency and self-determination as a survivor of dispossession?

It is often the case, that the ways in which populations are identified, named and subsequently etched in the white hegemonic imaginary as vulnerable yield essentialist correlatives between the conditions these populations endure and their overall self-determination. In their recent work, Judith Butler, Zaynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, point out that the relationship between vulnerability and resistance, which is often seen as antagonistic, is in fact better understood as a relation of causality and mediation. In their introduction to Vulnerability in Resistance they point out the need to move “beyond the human rights framework in which the positing of ‘vulnerable populations’ can become a way of foreclosing or devaluing modes of collective resistance among those designated as vulnerable” (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 7). This perspectival veering allows us to see vulnerability as “part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action” (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 7). What emerges is an ontological restructuring of notions of vulnerability and resistance, in which the former seems to create the enabling parameters for the latter. In turn, this rearticulation offers a revisited understanding of vulnerability not as the loss of agency, but rather as “a deliberate exposure to power” that affords the possibility for the enactment of agency through resistance (Butler VR 22).
Crucially, Butler asks her readers to consider what happens if we negate the experience of vulnerability in order to not undercut agency:

Does that imply that we prefer to see ourselves as those who are only acting, but not acted on? And how we might then describe those regions of both aesthetics and ethics that presume that our receptivity is bound up with our responsiveness, a zone in which we are acted on by the world, by what is said and shown, by what we hear, and by what touches us? (Butler VR 23)

This question, closely intertwined with what Butler also describes as the grievability of certain lives and the subsequent un-grievability of “other” lives, animates debates in the field of visual studies specifically focused on identification and the ethics of spectatorship. In the following section, I examine these debates and explain how they contribute to my working definitions of citizenship and dispossession for the purposes of this project.

**Visions of Citizenship and the Specter of Dispossession**

In their edited anthology *Biopolitics*, Timothy Campell and Adam Sitze reflect on the ways in which life gets entangled in the web of history. “What meaning can ‘life’ have,” they ask, “in an epoch when life itself is no longer outside of history, if it ever was, but is now simply an effect of history itself, one of its variable and contingencies”(9). Campell and Sitze formulate their question in a way that complicates issues of agency, but also, even more notably, in a way that refuses to account for the ways in which the historical narrative has shaped human life. Perhaps, a more nuanced articulation of how archives have recorded historical events and conditioned our responses and positionality to their reflected realities would be able to salvage a question that
appears so simplified. Instead, Sitze and Campell argue that “power’s ‘grasp’ of life (in a double sense of grip and understanding) does not allow us to stand outside of our own lives, to protect ourselves, to devise narratives able to change the conditions of our living non-existence. We are the animal whose politics place the existence --note ‘existence’ not ‘life’-- in question (15). The inescapable fate of man, according to Sitze and Campell, appears to unfold toward an anticipated telos. One might argue that such criticism would be acceptable in a philosophical debate on bios and bare life vis-a-vis politics and history; however their statement appears trite for populations whose marginalization and exploitation under capitalism are nothing but historically consistent. Sure, it might be a sober realization for the bourgeois subject to observe the stifling grip of power, but the observation appears at best naive for those who faced eons of settler colonialism, enslavement, forced migration, and labor exploitation. The complicity and imbrication of the bourgeois subject to these processes, following the rise of modernity and liberal humanism in Europe, is only one of the ways in which biopolitics falls short in providing a model for the study of dispossession and displacement.

Finding biopolitics limited in its analytical scope, I turn instead to critical race theory and feminisms of color critique as more comprehensive frameworks for the analysis of the emergent counter-archive and the representational practices that it engenders. In addition, I am returning to Butler’s distinction between “acting” and “being acted on” as rubrics for the assessment of inclusion, and expand the query to include work by visual studies theorists, who work on the complicated relationships and ethics that develop in the visual field.

A crucial shift in the ways in which contemporary archives are envisioned and populated with information takes place through imagery procured by digital media. The reliance on imagery to tell a story as well as the expectation for the story to be true since it relies on visual
proof complicates questions of ethical witnessing. This historical process, of images functioning as narrative companion pieces, has been underway for a while, theorized by scholars working on visuality from a broad disciplinary perspective. Defined as a “pictorial turn” or as “the visual construction of the social field” by WJT Mitchell, the emergent visual discourse creates strong emotive responses in the audience (qtd. in Fleetwood 8). Similarly, theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Jose Esteban Munoz call attention to the ways in which the affective economies that emerge as a response to visual and other sensory stimuli utilize affect not as an impediment caused by a “psychological disposition” but rather as a prism to examine connections between “the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (Ahmed qtd. in Fleetwood 11). Munoz, specifically underscores the ways in which race and ethnicity can be “understood as ‘affective difference’,” a term he uses to describe “the ways in which various historically coherent groups ‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register” (qtd. in Fleetwood 11). Finally, Lauren Berlant speaks of the “collective attachment” that emerges through one’s encounter with notions that generate a sense of belonging and inclusion, or as she explains, “a form of optimism in how emotions can bring people together” (qtd. in Fleetwood 10). The acknowledgement of such a sensation is also evident in Laura Doyle’s conception of Europe as “an affect” in Modernities Modernisms and the Crossing of Empires (4).

Following Doyle, if we assume that notions of European hegemony are construed through affect, then it is equally true that the exclusion from such formations is also registered in an affective manner. Theorists such as Nicole Fleetwood explicate on the processes through which the ocular, in particular, mediates feelings of inclusion and exclusion, belonging or excision. Fleetwood writes in Troubling Vision that “in essence, the visual sphere has been
understood in black cultural studies as a punitive field -- the scene of punishment-- in which subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allow whites to define themselves through the process of ‘negative differentiation’” (13). The perpetuation of black stereotypes, and the resonance of their afterimage according to Brown in *The Repeating Body*, contributes to what Hartman calls the spectacular nature of black suffering, and what Elizabeth Alexander has described as the way in which the “attendant dramas [of black bodies are publicly consumed by the larger populace” (79). For Alexander this matter is further complicated by the ways in which the white hegemonic gaze is internalized by blacks “forging a traumatized collective historical memory, which is re-invoked at contemporary sites of conflict” (79). Sharpe writes that the perpetuation of a climate of anti-blackness is evident in the ways in which “...black people ejected from the state become the national symbols for the less-than-human being condemned to death; become the carriers of *terror*, terror’s embodiment (an internal, the internal terrorist threat) and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments but the ground of terror’s possibility” (79). Saidiya Hartman writes about the ways in which the sensory and affective imaginaries surround the black body have resulted in its fungibility and othering. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman writes that “rather than bespeaking the mutuality of social relations or the expressive and affective capacities of the subject, sentiment, enjoyment, affinity, will and desire facilitated subjugation, domination and terror, precisely by praying upon the flesh, the heart and the soul” (5). Elizabeth Alexander also notes that the systemic ways in which black bodies and affective economies around them have been portrayed “write a counter-narrative which erased bodily information as we knew it and substituted a countertext, which in many cases has become a version of national memory” (80).
At stake now, is the documentation of the ineffable, yet palpable reality that emerges along with the affective economies of dispossession. How do we construct a counter-archive of lived experience that liberates the dispossessed subject from the confines of hegemony and colonial epistemology? Or as Sharpe puts it, “…how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the anti-black worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures” (115)? Bearing witness to the vicissitudes of slavery and the struggle for emancipation depends on developing an ethics of witnessing, a decolonial curatorial practice vis-a-vis the archive, and a critical restructuring of our vocabularies for the categorization of lived experience. Perhaps in so doing we might attain Sharpe’s aspiration that “while we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force” (131).

Outline of Chapters

My first chapter, “Spectral Palimpsests: Zong!, Beloved, and the Archive of the Black Atlantic,” reflects on the malleable genres that emerge from contemporary reverberations of the transatlantic slave trade. I examine how the experience of dispossession is relayed via the deft manipulation of narrative forms such as poetry and prose, and illustrate the ways in which genre conventions are reimagined by authorial voices that contest the colonial archive. Specifically, I argue that NourbeSe Philip and Toni Morrison, authors of Zong! and Beloved respectively, engage in a palimpsestic archival practice, that exhumes the stories of enslavement, and challenges the hegemonic premises of conventional slave narratives. In so doing the authors
unsettle racial hierarchies embedded in the hermeneutics of abolition, and instead engage in an epistemological shift that contests the colonial archive and places emphasis on affect, as a means of deciphering human experience. Utilizing a rich sensorium visual, auditory and haptic, Philip and Morrison offer an alternative ethics of witnessing dispossession without falling pray to the perilous sentimentalism of earlier texts. Visual, auditory, and haptic elements guide the reader to a more nuanced understanding of how racial capitalism flourished via the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitative labor in the plantation economies of the New World.

In my second chapter, “Reclaiming the Unhomely: Emblematicity and Reappropriation as Decolonial Tropes in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda,*” I revisit emblems and their visual metonymic function and argue that they foster emancipatory potential for the decolonization of spaces both public and private. This chapter furthers my argument by exploring how contemporary writers depict dispossession via emblematic structures and performances that contest the unhomely grounds of the New World. This alternative commemorative practice conflates monumentality with the ephemeral evidence that enslaved populations contributed to the historical archive, as their narratives predominantly oral are often excluded from official historical accounts. My analysis focuses on *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Pagoda* by Patricia Powell and aims to show how the protagonists of these works bear witness to the atrocities of enslavement and indenture. In order to reclaim the spatial and fictive terrains in which they find themselves displaced, I argue that the protagonists cultivate a fascination with surfaces on which memory and lived experience are inscribed; Corregidora’s photograph, Lowe’s sartorial disguise, Ursa’s stage avatar, a cultural center in the shape of a Pagoda. In their effort to propose alternative commemorative practices that resist fixed historiographical constructs, Jones and Powell reappropriate the function of emblems and seek to
undermine the immediacy of their signifying capacities. The authors contest the emblem as a visual genre permeated by the fixity of its associated meanings in order to reaffirm their own marginalized narratives against official historical records. As a result, the novels’ protagonists create embodied, material, and emblematic monuments, which reorganize our perception of lived experience and space, and in so doing destabilize the fixity of the colonial archive. In addition, the reclamation of ownership over one’s formerly enslaved body through performance, or the desire to mark one’s space physically and allegorically as a site of commemoration, inaugurates the protagonists’ efforts to reinstate their status as liberated subjects, and to resist their inscription in narratives of colonial conquest. In this way, emblems are repurposed to serve as tools for the decolonization of terrestrial and fictive space and to foster the recuperation of one’s life narrative from the ashes of history.

My third chapter, “Geographies of Blackness, Immigration, and Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah,” focuses on the transcontinental movement of Nigerian immigrants from Africa to the United States and Britain, and theorizes the ways in which citizenship and visions of inclusion are permeated by a DuBoisean “double-consciousness” as well as by tropes of surveillance and sousveillance. I also argue that immigration issues are regulated and decided upon based on a prefabricated rubric of deserving and undeserving bodies determined along the axes of race and gender, and pose an intersectional critique that resists the narrative of the exceptional immigrant as the standard for a new form of respectability politics. To put pressure on the politics of classifiability exerted on immigrant bodies, I trace the neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric that the novel often employs, and consider both of these as forms of oppression and explicit coercion into a vision of post-Nigerian blackness, which nonetheless also applies to Nigeria in its a postcolonial/neocolonial formation.
To be more exact, I examine how immigrants experience dispossession on multiple fronts; in the form of societal alienation, financial precarity, labor exploitation, sexual harassment, and curtailed access to healthcare, and then discuss how such phenomena are construed in the immigrants’ imaginary as part of American public discourse and as an inextricable aspect of American identity. To illustrate this dynamic, I turn to visual art by Toyin Ojih Odutola, a first generation Nigerian-American who negotiates in her portraiture complex questions about identity and belonging. Finally, I uncover the ways in which immigrant bodies are under constant surveillance by state apparatuses and by media projections of their physical and intellectual abilities. I argue that this process is also informed by the sousveillance that immigrants engage in, as a means to situate themselves in their new surroundings, and to record their story in an archive that abides by their understanding of their new terrains.

My final chapter, “Graphing Women in Flight: Ruminations on Citizenship and Abjection from *Persepolis* to the Syrian Refugee Crisis” traces a genealogical relation between textual and visual representations of dispossession in the Middle East and the Arab World. I am specifically looking at *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, and at documentary photography from the Syrian Refugee Crisis awarded with the Pulitzer Prize to examine the depiction of suffering and the emergence of a curatorial ethics that confronts the precarious empathic identification that narratives of dispossession often emanate. I argue for the development of a practice of ethical witnessing that resists sensationalized accounts of dispossessed migrants in flight and raise questions about how citizenship is reconfigured in a neoliberal, globalized, and increasingly polarized world. My engagement with these sources, as well as with social media platforms and short documentaries which I also examine vis-à-vis these texts, is informed by critical race theory, feminisms of color critique, and affect theory.
To conclude, this project aims to engage in an archival practice that takes into account the diverse media and authorial voices that contribute to historical documentation. At the same time, I am hoping to show how the malleability of available genres fosters emancipatory potential against white hegemonic, colonial and patriarchal accounts of past events. By revisiting the ways in which affect is imbricated in this counter-archival process, I call attention to the precarity of empathy that is procured through uncritical identification and sentimentalist tropes, and develop a theory for the ethical curation and witnessing of lived experience.
Chapter One
Spectral Palimpsests: Zong!, Beloved and the Archive of the Black Atlantic

“to render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way.”

-Morrison, Beloved

“If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of Black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know.”

-Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This?”

Introduction

In 1840, on the occasion of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, J.M.W. Turner depicted in grim colors the horrors of enslavement in “Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying; Typhoon Coming On).” The Convention, organized by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, provided a suitable venue for Turner, who was already a prominent, even if controversial, figure of the British Arts.
Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying; Typhoon Coming On)

In addition to the painting and in order to bolster his abolitionist agenda, Turner used one of his previously unpublished poems as a companion piece, hoping to elicit an emotive response from the attendants. Entitled “Fallacies of Hope,” his poem read:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
Declare the Typhon's coming.
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy market now? (Shanes 222)

Replete with the imagery of the Middle Passage, Turner’s painting and poem were inspired by the Zong Massacre, a notorious slave trade case and a turning point for abolitionist efforts. Zong, a slaveship commanded by Luke Collingwood, was crossing the Atlantic in 1781 when it was decided that the captives deemed less fit to survive would be thrown overboard. As the ship drifted ashore with provisions running low, Collingwood’s “cargo” was stacked as cattle, fatigued and famished. The deteriorating health of the captives compromised their marketability. Collingwood intended to claim insurance reparations for their loss at sea, a new possibility afforded by the development of burgeoning fiscal constructs such as capitalism and credit. Upon his return he was able to receive insurance monies according to his plan; yet soon, a legal confrontation emerged regarding the wrongdoings onboard the vessel. The focus of the legal case was not murder, as one might surmise, but rather insurance fraud.

It is evident why J.M.W Turner, and the rest of the abolitionists, found the Zong incident a potent case study. The disposability of the enslaved Africans was a cruel testament to the slave trade’s morbid enterprise. Turner’s painting on the occasion of the World Anti-Slavery Convention served as a means to bridge the gap between vague narratives of enslavement and
the reality of the inhuman practice that it was. “Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying; Typhoon Coming On)” visually codified the dispossession and uprooting of the enslaved Africans, and thus made their suffering palpable to the audience. Turner’s depiction of the events, with the ship dissolving in the background and the limbs of the drowning Africans raised in an invocation of mercy, aimed to trigger an emotive reaction and instigate empathy. Through the pairing of narrative and imagery, Turner was hoping to engage the audience in an affective manner and to procure their abolitionist affinity.

Indubitably, literary contemporaries of Turner were well-versed in the conflation of visual imagery and text to convey meaning. Ekphrasis, the act of explicating in writing the intricacies of an artwork such as a painting or sculpture, was often deployed by the classics and the romantics alike. From Homer’s depiction of Achille’s shield in the Iliad, to Keat’s Ode to a Grecian Urn, ekphrasis was a staple in literary sensory evocation. Stemming from Greek “ἔκφρασις,” meaning to relay in clarity, this practice was employed to describe the visual components of the imagery, and more crucially the emotive effect of the artwork on the viewer. To this end, John Ruskin, a contemporary and avid supporter of Turner, performed another instance of ekphrasis on the “Slave Ship.” Ruskin wrote:

The slaver throwing its cargo overboard is the most tremendous piece of color that ever was seen; it sets the corner of the room in which it hangs into flame… The sun glares down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple, into which chocolate-colored slaves are plunged, and chains that will not sink; and round these are floundering such a race of fishes as never was seen since the saeculum Pyrrhae; gasping dolphins redder than the reddest herrings; horrid spreading polypi, like huge, slimy, poached eggs, in which hapless [black slaves] plunge and disappear. Ye gods, what a middle passage.
Ruskin’s embellished prose and his dramatic depiction of the subject matter aimed to have an emotive appeal to the readers, yet, it is not certain that it was the abolitionist cause that propelled this ekphrastic endeavor forward. Instead, Ruskin’s objective was to educate his audience on the multivalent ways through which art appeals to the senses. In his description, visual, auditory, and haptic elements capture the readers’ attention and leave a vivid imprint of the painting on their perception. Ruskin seems to argue that meaning emerges from the visual more efficiently than it could have been inferred from a written account of the events.

Whereas the practice of ekphrasis proposes a complementary relation between imagery and language, contemporary scholars working on the intersection of visual studies and affect theory contest the claim to equivalence between the two. They suggest that imagery is an alternative means of mediating meaning, one that often resists the processes of cognition and the ideological frameworks inherent in language. In earlier works, such as the “Rhetoric of the Image,” Roland Barthes argues that the image is not a “re-representation [and] ultimately [a] resurrection” of a conceptual entity. Instead, Barthes unmasks the ways in which imagery acquires and emanates meaning in non-conceptual terms. Barthes notes that “the image is felt to be weak in respect of meaning: there are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image’s ineffable richness” (152). He therefore aims to resolve this opposition by “submitting the image to a spectral analysis of the messages it might contain” (152). To do so, Barthes argues that, “in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (emphasis mine 156). “Linguistic message,” he posits “is one of these techniques” (156). The question, however, emerges; if language is a way to relieve the terror that a floating chain of visual
“signifieds” might engender, then what would be attained by the opposite, incorporating obscure and amphisemous imagery into a steady flow of linguistic content? In other words, what exactly is the use and effect of incorporating visual stimuli within a verbal narrative, particularly when these stimuli disorient the reader and perform an unsettling function? If we accept Barthes’s contention, then the imminent sense of terror would inevitably return.

I find this suggestion to be particularly generative in examining narratives of dispossession written by contemporary African American authors, in which the trauma of the black diaspora and the lingering afterlife of slavery become visually inscribed in the writers’ work instead of being verbally announced. Looking at NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,* I examine how these texts disrupt the colonial logic of language, and instead use sonic, aural, and haptic modes to ask the reader to make sense and shape of the experience of dispossession. Acknowledging the complicity of the reader in the uncritical reception and perpetration of the colonial archive, these texts invite her active engagement in an emancipatory hermeneutics that aims to produce a counter-archive based on affect and sentience. For example, in the evolution of the genre of the slave narrative, from 19th century sentimentalism to the visceralized sentience in contemporary neo-slave narratives, the focus is now upon the physical and material experience of enslavement rather than on the employment of sentimental sympathy. Through the unsettling effect of ocular hints and other sensory tropes, the reader is immersed in an unsettling heuristic experience, which on a metatextual level is analogous to the experience of displacement and dispossession.

In *The Repeating Body,* Kimberly Juanita Brown points out that “black subjectivity is tethered to sight,” as the black body oscillates between hypervisibility and invisibility in the national imaginary and the historical archive. The legacy of slavery lingers, informing
contemporary discourses on the black body, perpetuating oppression. Brown argues that the trauma of enslavement visually registers as an “afterimage” in the contemporary moment, functioning as an “ocular residue” of the atrocities past. “What remains” she argues “is the question of affect and effect, the sentimental attachments of the visual and the familial and their lingering imaginaries” (Brown 11). Similarly, Jill Bennett in *Empathic Vision* argues that art is the “visual language of trauma and of the experiences of conflict and loss” (2). Bennett’s contention that “trauma becomes a chimera of the real,” is all the more accurate if we consider that the representation of trauma in art is contingent upon the perspectival position of the artist, and the sensory impact of the artwork as it is received by the audience. Both are unpredictable, and therefore the production and reception of the traumatic encounter is fraught with ambiguity. According to Bennett, “the operative element of the artwork is its effective rather than its signifying capacity,” one that conforms to Deleuze’s concept of the “encountered sign,” which is “felt rather than perceived through cognition” (12). The complimentary and often contestatory relation between imagery and prose is therefore illuminating, but the text in itself is not impervious to the aforementioned sensory dynamic.

This turn to the visual in the work of Philip and Morrison connotes incredulity towards verbal narrative, founded on the postcolonialist premise that language is a byproduct of imperialist discourse, molded with white privilege and conferred according to hierarchal power structures of dominance. More critically, when historical records are saturated with the language of colonialism¹, writers resort to expressive resources that do not pertain to the logic of language, but rather to feeling.

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¹ Colonialist discourses abide by Eurocentric laws of domination that depict Transatlantic encounters in fiscal terms, therefore imposing a clear social hierarchy in which the colonized or diasporic subjects are rendered subhuman.
In this chapter, I examine how these structures of feeling operate in narratives of dispossession on two fronts. Looking at *Zong!* and *Beloved*, I argue that the prevalence of visual, auditory, and haptic elements in contemporary narratives of enslavement creates a more nuanced understanding of dispossession through the senses. Given their reluctance to rely on language, Philip and Morrison opt for alternative narrative strategies aiming to reclaim the humanity of their characters and attain redress. These elements are manifest both in form and in content and vary from the formal rendering of the words on the physical page, to the emergence of the captives’ embodied presence in the text. I aim to disclose how the affective terrain of the text is constituted through a roadmap of extra-discursive clues –ocular, auditory, and haptic –that in turn open up the text to multivalent interpretations. I view the prevalence of these elements as an epistemological shift from empathic identification, mediated by cognitive processes, to affect as visceral feeling and sentience, and I argue that this shift unsettles colonial schemes of knowledge production and in so doing invites a more ethical engagement with the stories recuperated from the archive.

Second, I argue that contemporary black writers seek alternative ways to narrate the experience of enslavement without resorting to genres or rhetorical structures imbued with white privilege. To allow formerly enslaved populations to regain their agency through narrative, Philip and Morrison deconstruct language and forgo restrictions of genre. This approach results in a revisionist and palimpsestic view of the archive of the Black Atlantic, which liberates narratives of enslavement from the confines of colonial discourse, and in turn instigates a more affective engagement with the history of slavery and emancipation through the senses.

This affective engagement is crucial in revising the genre of the slave narrative. In the long 19th century, narratives of enslavement traditionally depended on sentimentalism to relay
the immoral and dehumanizing effect of slavery. Sentimentalism was employed to instigate empathy and procure the audience’s alliance with the abolitionist cause. This “moral suasion,” as Jennifer Williamson argues, was based on the sympathy the readers developed for the black subject; yet, contemporary theorists challenge the notion that empathic association between the predominantly white readership of the slave narrative and the narrating black subject comes without significant repercussions (13). Empathy as a means to form an emancipatory civic conscience in the white audience relies upon an identificatory modus operandi, which emphasizes the divide between self and other rather than eliminates it. Saidiya Hartman argues that “the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to a racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience integral to the wanton use of the captive body” (20). In that sense we are reminded of “the repressive underside of an optics of morality that insists upon the other as a mirror of the self” and of the subsequent failure to recognize black suffering without substituting the self for the other, a fact that is a priori unattainable given the social hierarchies of colonialism (20). In that sense, empathy entraps the black subject via the politics of identification in a curtailed and stratified version of shared humanity. Evoking ties of affect through visual, auditory, and haptic elements in the text offers an alternative emancipatory potential, if we consider the precognitive space in which affect emerges. Assuming that the hermeneutics of the slave narrative become perilous when empathic identification emerges, we might turn instead to the visceral reactions that produce affect to find an alternative sensory engagement that does not betray the agency of the black narrator.
The outcome of this affective engagement enables the historical archive to serve as a syncretic locus for the contestation of black identity and subject formation. The next segment of this chapter discusses the ways in which Philip and Morrison deconstruct language to allow for a sensory rendering of dispossession, while the final part examines the malleability of genre in the space of the Black Atlantic and foregrounds the ways in which this veering from language to feeling constitutes an epistemological shift, a new way of knowing that is not cognitive, but rather viscerally felt in the construction of the slave narrative.

I. Unmasking Language

NourbeSe Philip’s poetry is a testament to the transformative effect of stripping language down to its constituents. Born in Tobago, Philip studied economics, political science, and law before turning to creative writing. In her work, she explores language as a semiotic system under the reign of patriarchy and colonialism. Her poetic and literary works provide spaces for the reconceptualization of language as it dissolves to engender intricate negotiations of identity, both public and private. Her work has studied both the generative potential of silence (*An Odyssey of Silence*, 1991), and the emergence of newfound possibilities in poetic expression through the deconstruction of language. Originally published in 1988 in Cuba, her collection of poems *She tries her tongue/ Her silence softly breaks* reached the American audience in 1993. In this collection, Philip revisits the classics and re-appropriates mythic narratives in an attempt to contest language and its use. Based on the myth of Philomela, the poem lending its name to the

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*3 Both *Zong!* and *Beloved* are based on archival findings, which provide accounts of the events from the standpoint of the perpetrators of dispossession. The Gregson V Gilbert case, describing the Massacre on board the Zong, survives through a single extant document, which discusses the events as insurance fraud— not murder—therefore rendering the enslaved Africans on board the ship as property. Similarly, the legal correspondence explicating the case of Margaret Garner, on whose life *Beloved* is based, is focused on determining her status as person or property, in order to assess whether she should be tried for the murder of her daughter, or returned to her master according to the Fugitive Slave Law.*
collection aims to uncover masculine violence and to recuperate silenced feminine testimony.

According to Ovid’s version of the myth in the fourth book of the *Metamorphoses*, Philomela embarks on a long journey accompanied by Tereus, her sister’s husband. While on their way, Tereus rapes Philomela, assuming that his royal status will shelter him from any repercussions; however, Philomela refuses to keep her abuse covert. She explains to Tereus that she will uncover his adultery and the incestuous act that he committed:

My self, abandon'd, and devoid of shame,
Thro' the wide world your actions will proclaim;
Or tho' I'm prison'd in this lonely den,
Obscur'd, and bury'd from the sight of men,
My mournful voice the pitying rocks shall move,
And my complainings echo thro' the grove.

Tereus, unwilling to suffer any repercussions for his crime, enslaves Philomela and silences her by cutting her tongue. This brutal deprivation of speech indicates Philomela’s curtailed social status as female, in spite of her royal affiliation. Her articulatory capacity is therefore tantamount to her liberating potential, and in turn the lack thereof indicates her entrapment in social limbo.

As the myth unravels, Philomela, fights against the restrictions imposed by her mutilated tongue and seeks alternative ways to communicate her loss. In the two variations of the myth, Philomela either weaves the story into a tapestry that she later exhibits to her sister, or manages to write the story down and pass it along. Both acts indicate Philomela’s intention to bear witness at any cost, as through the former Philomela appropriates a domestic item and turns it into a means to offering testimony, whereas in the latter instance, she abandons domesticity and the orality that is associated with it to enter the public realm and produce a written testament of her abuse. Once Procne, Philomela’s sister, realizes her husband’s horrid crime, she kills their son and feeds him to Tereus, who later attempts to kill both sisters. Finally, through divine intervention, the sisters are transformed into nightingales.
Philomela’s metamorphosis affords her the opportunity to regain her voice in an alternative modality (as a nightingale), a fact that reinstates her virtue and enables a discourse of redress in the context of the myth. In “She tries her tongue/ Her silence softly breaks,” Philip embarks on a similar quest for the reclamation of her agency as a black woman. The poem directly alludes to the Ovidian interpretation of Philomela’s mythic tale, placing emphasis on the transformative aspect of the experience through its epigram, “All things are alter'd, nothing is destroyed,” a verse from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (84). Philip’s contention that traces of the trauma linger as residue waiting to be uncovered in spite of the masking effect of language, is manifest in her decision to preface her poem with this epigram. Her emphasis on mutation, rather than mut(e)ilation, also indicates the regenerative potential that the process of transformation, or metamorphosis, engenders:

When silence is

Abdication of word   tongue and lip
Ashes of once in what was
   ...Silence
   Song   word   speech
   Might I...like Philomela...sing
   continue
   over
   into

...pure utterance. (98)

In the poem, silence turns into song, and is later elevated to the valorized status of “pure utterance,” signifying a protean and transformative quality in silence, which language cannot contest. Along with mutation, mutilation is prevalent in the poem, both in form and in content. “Abdication,” reminiscent of “abduction,” brings to mind Philomela’s story, while the reference to “tongue and lip” as abdicated evokes the visual image of mutilation as much as it evokes semantic fragmentation, “lip” being used instead of “lips.” The mutilated syntax, that inevitably affects the composition of the poem, further intensifies the feeling of fragmentation, as reflected
in the third line, “Ashes of once in what was.” The internal rhyming manages to keep the utterance together thematically, as it makes the reference to the past tangible, “what was” being the dominant status quo and “once” indicating the personal, the traumatic moment of rupture. The “Ashes” symbolize the residue remaining, surviving the ferocious attempts of effacement by language. They also signify a spiritual dimension, as ashes, the organic residue of a burned body, symbolize one’s subjectivity that might have been “burned,” yet is not entirely effaced. The ashes are a symbol of regeneration and rebirth; the nightingale might not have a similar story, but the mythic phoenix has indeed risen from the ashes.

Philip re-appropriates Ovid’s text and uses it as stimulus for poetic contemplation as she ruminates on the versions of language available to her. Through these transformations she allows her authorial voice to emerge from the master narratives of the past, to re-appropriate canonical texts that circumscribe her status in their margins, and finally to revisit the validity of their fundamental premises. Philip’s concern with the purity of utterance stems from her incredulity towards language; silence offers another venue to circumvent it. In her verse, the word “silence” is visually and structurally separated by utterances such as “song,” “words,” and “speech” however, the latter terms are later reconciled. They indicate a progression and a transformative interaction, as one morphs into the other. The ambiguity at the end of the poem defining her progression and evolution both “over” and “into” “pure utterance,” is indicative of the elusive nature of language, and offers the possibility of overcoming it. In this sense, Philip finds new liberating venues for the expression of her ideas and for the transformation of her subjectivity, as by being deprived of her tongue she is no longer limited by language, the semiotic system in which patriarchal discourse is encoded.
In her article, “Dream of the Mother Language” Naomi Guttman argues that “Philip's goal is to force an active reconstruction and questioning of the past, particularly of how the imperialist project succeeded in dominating African slaves through ‘the logic of language’,” a statement that describes Philip’s later work and most prevalently her ars poetica, Zong! (53). Philip’s recuperative work with the archive of enslavement focuses on the voices lost in the void of historical representation.

In Ghostly Matters, Avery Gordon ponders: “How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly? How do we develop a critical language to describe and analyze the affective, historical and mnemonic structures of such hauntings?” (18). These tantalizing questions inform her work on recuperating the “ghost” as a “social figure,” but they are also central to Philip’s work on archival re-appropriation (8). Gordon acknowledges the resonance of her inquiry with the archive of enslavement and the African diaspora. “Slavery has ended,” she writes, “but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation that we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done” (139).

That which needs to be done, Philip and Gordon assert, is to dissect the language of the archive, to decipher its silences, and finally to achieve “unity with the dead... because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope” (Gordon 20). Zong!, therefore, presents Philip with an ontological as well as an ethical challenge in response to Gregson V. Gilbert. Philip uses the term “hauntology,” to illustrate through this coinage the centrality of the ancestral experience of dispossession to her quest and identity. As the Zong embarked on its transatlantic journey, Zong!, a vessel in symbolic terms, emerges from the waters of omission to reclaim its position in the historical archive of the Middle Passage. The
poem is not merely intended as a narrative of the atrocities of enslavement. Its focal objective is to attain redress through the articulation of the story from the perspective of the captives thrown overboard. As a result, *Zong!* is inhabited by the spectral presences of enslaved Africans, who haunt it in their effort to reclaim their humanity.

Finding language and the genres available unsuitable to convey the story, Philip invests in disrupting the verbal aspects of the narrative and instead engages in a conjuring of extra-discursive visual and auditory elements, to create the image and soundscape of the Middle Passage. Gregson V. Gilbert, which serves as the historical record for the event, ignores the significance of the crime committed and deprives the victims of their humanity. “It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow creatures may become the subject of property,” the decision reads (#). Philip through *Zong!* seeks to reinstate the slaves’ status as human rather than as property. In her postscript to the poem, she posits: “In *Zong!*, the African transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation *to not-tell* the story” (196 emphasis mine). This passage, indicative of Philip’s efforts to explicate the underlying impetus for her composition, signifies her objective: to reverse the dehumanization of the enslaved Africans as imposed by law, and to achieve their subsequent reinstatement as humans by broadcasting their own voices. The sensory undoing of the colonial narrative hints at the possibility of redress in the wake of chronic and systemic dispossession for the captives onboard *Zong.*
Palpably Present

Philip is adamant that in order for the story to be revealed, it must remain “untold,” “unspoken.” The failure of language to convey meaning is the core of her poetic quest, since the effacement of her ancestors from historical accounts was attained through language. A central tenet of Zong! as a project, the distrust of language is based on the premise that language is inevitably conditioned by discourses of colonial power. The text of Gregson v. Gilbert, which resolved Zong’s legal case, is a tangible imposition of power in textual form. Philip dismantles the text to allow the historical event to emerge from the silence, uncensored and unfiltered. In an act of retribution, she violently attacks language that complies with the logic of the plantation economy.  

Philip explains in her Notanda:

I murder the text literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunction overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem until my hand bloodies, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.

(194 emphasis mine)

Philip breaks language down into fragments. She assaults and tears apart the text to disrupt the preordained flow of language that perpetuates the logic of the slave trade. Instead it is reduced to its constituent parts offering impetus for an alternative reconstruction. The basic forms of language that remain, bare and mutilated, are, according to Philip, the bare residue of the story as it surfaces from the legal text: “The poems are about language at its most fundamental,” Philip writes, “in the sense of the very basic way in which children put language together when they

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4 Language fosters race dynamics that render the presence of her ancestors non-existent and hers marginal within the dominant status quo.
begin to speak, building syllable on syllable – carefully – leaving off articles: Africans want water…” (195). These elemental utterances in her poem indicate a turn of aesthetics from the verbal to the visual regarding the communication of meaning, both public and private. Resisting the tendency to indulge in lexical embellishments that would amplify her expressive resources, Philip prefers minimal, laconic utterances that dissolve before the readers’ eyes.⁵

Haunted by the presence of her ancestors, whose voices create the soundscape of her poem, Philip attempts to create a space in time for the traumatic event to be dramatized, relived, and therefore recorded afresh. As Philip suggests, the voices of her ancestors emerge from the void to occupy her imaginative capacities and produce the text. In a revealing maneuver the poet “recognizes” the spirit of Sataey Adamu Boateng, an African onboard the ship, and claims it as her ancestor. Philip’s quest aims not only to define her subjectivity through the establishment of a symbolic genealogy, but also connotes a profound interest in making the tensions that shape the plantation economies palpable. In “Os,” the opening chapter of Zong!, the poems are presented along with names written as footnotes on the page. Philip invents these names and proceeds with assigning them to the captives onboard the ship, in an attempt to pay tribute to her ancestors lost at sea, but also in order to position herself within a genealogy of Africans striving for the reinstatement of their identity. This process of naming enacts her desire to belong, to create a fictive space of recognition for her ancestors. Simultaneously, Philip’s command over language, naming in particular, takes an embodied, visual turn, through the immersion of the spectral presence of the ancestors on the vessel and in the narrative. Her tenacity in personally identifying every captive on board the ship is, however, subverted in the last chapter of her book, in which Philip focuses on the impossibility of such an endeavor.

⁵ These dissolving utterances add to the spectral quality that the book possesses in terms of its materiality, as discussed later in this chapter.
After the generative invention of their names, Philip conjures her ancestors to bear witness to and provide evidence for the atrocities on board Zong. Their testimony is crucial for the emergence of an alternative record of the Middle Passage. In “Zong! # 24” Philip attempts to define, and dismantle at the same time, the concept of evidence through their voices:
Key components of the Zong case are redefined through the creation of lists in the poem, to resemble the ancestral presence in the historical archive merely as property counted on the ship register. Through these lists, Philip hints at the mathematical structure of language, rendering both parts of the analogy created around “is” ostensibly true. At the same time, she exposes the artificiality of such constructs and their malleable nature by inserting an additional definition of each word or structure from her perspective. By establishing these parallels, she indicates the embedded social and cultural schemas that shape the public sphere. Evidence is what sustains and supports the law, one might argue. On the other hand, given the absence of any kind of syntactical framing that would connote a causal relationship between the words listed, an alternative would be to argue that evidence is sustained so that the law can support the prevalent social structures that implement it, and vice versa. The open-ended schema formed by the definitions in the poem is therefore porous, as it almost provokes a vicious circle that would equate evidence with law and so on. Moreover, the word “sustenance” can be used arbitrarily both for the “sustenance” of the colonial structures that shape the law, as well as for the “sustenance” of the historical realities faced by enslaved Africans. “Sustenance” in this sense has similar function to “ashes” in “She tries her tongue/ Her silence softly breaks,” since it connotes the residual quality of the evidence that can potentially prove subversive and regenerating.

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6 See Ian Baucom “Specters of the Atlantic.”
Similarly, in the next stanza, on the definition of “perils,” Philip arranges her thoughts as follows:

perils

is
the trial
is
the rains
is
the seas
is
the currents. (41)

Philip’s choice of trial as the primary definition for “peril” instigates the same ambivalent reaction on behalf of the reader. Is she referring to “trial and error,” as in Collingwood’s inaccurate estimations that lead to the disastrous outcome, or is she hinting at the actual trial, whose premise is an affront to African subjectivity? The next stanza polemical and explicit sheds light to the controversy.

the case

is

murder, (41)

Philip states, and the reader content with her resolution turns the page to find that the stanza resumes.

is

justice, (42)

destabilizes the previous conclusion. The confrontation that seems to take place regarding how justice is configured within colonial schemas aims to reveal its elusive nature and its multiple interpretations. This conflict is indeed perilous as the latter part of the poem signifies. After
offering a long list of terms already discussed, Philip attempts an alternate spatial configuration on the page that visually signifies a different causal relationship:

```
  evidence is
    sustenance is
    support is
    the law is
    the ship is
    the captain is
    ....

  negroes

  was (42).
```

It is evident that in the absence of syntactical patterns that formally impose structure as well as meaning, Philip uses a grammatical distinction as subtle as a tense change to indicate what remains, the words of the legal document, and what perishes, the testimonies of the enslaved Africans onboard Zong. The former, Gregson V. Gilbert, provides the official account of events to this day; however, as Philip notes the testimony of the captives lingers, waiting to be uncovered. The use of “was” instead of the normally expected “were,” has a unifying purpose, as it coalesces the captives into one symbolic African diasporic body. The creative grammatical transgression and the dissonance between the plural “negroes” and the singular form “was” indicate friction between the personal and the collective.

Similarly “Zong! #25, presents interplay among “justify,” “could,” “authorize,” “captain” and “crew.” The different variations of the sentences produced, make the words appear as interchangeable, resulting in a reconfiguration of our concept of authority:

```
  the crew
  the captain &
  the could

  the justify
```
Again ambiguity looms over the phantom of Zong. The mythical status of the massacre is predicated upon the fact that no record of it exists with the exception of the legal case against Collingwood. The speculation instigated as a result is as unstable as the language that engenders it; a fact that emphasizes the elusiveness of this case and prevents Philip from fulfilling her quest. The multiple alliterations of c sounds in “could”, “captain” and “crew”, as well as the incessant repetition of “the,” assign to the poem musical qualities, which turn it into an African chant. By deconstructing language, Philip presents an alternative account of the events in a different modality. This transformation, similar to that of Philomela, in “She tries her tongue/Her silence softly breaks” fosters the reclamation of African agency, as Philip turns the text into a distinctly African genre, and thus re-contextualizes the story within her black cultural heritage.

The orality assigned to Zong! is an homage to the cultures of the African diaspora. In Notanda, Philip claims, “many is the time in the writing of this essay when my fingers would hit an S rather than a Z in typing Zong. Song and Zong: with the exception of one letter, the two words are identical; if said quickly enough they sound the same” (207). This observation is complementary to the exclamatory, almost exuberant intonation of Zong!. For as much as it is a lamentation, Zong! chronicles the reinstatement of the captives’ humanity as Philip notes:
why an exclamation mark after Zong!? Zong! is chant! Shout! And Ululation! Zong! is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! Zong! is “pure utterance.” Zong! is Song! And Song is what has kept the soul of Africa intact when they want(ed) water…sustenance…preservation.” Zong! is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling. (207)

Zong! is therefore characterized by intricacies in form that reflect the historical tensions embedded in the poem and partake in the uncovering of the story by “un-telling it” (207).

Instead, the visual rhetoric employed through the rendering of the poem on the page, along with its auditory elements create a potent, synesthetic outcome. The fragmentation of words, the disparate configurations imposed by crippled syntactical and grammatical patterns, emerge from the text as a new grammar, an alternative set of aesthetic criteria, that assist in comprehending Philip’s text. Despite the original estrangement of the reader, the confusion that ensues is an affective quality of the poem that Philip welcomes, as it helps the readers experience the situation onboard Zong; in the midst of the ocean, deprived of food and water, the captives deal not only with misfortune, but also with profound confusion, given the fact that they are exposed to a language that they cannot understand, and perils that are fatal. Similarly the readers find themselves in a disorienting situation, immersed in a text that difficult to follow, coming together at points only to dissipate at others. The grammatical structures that hold the text together are a provisional “ordering” as Philip claims in her Notanda, “but a violent and necessary ordering,” similar to that imposed on the Africans thrown overboard (192). Philip writes in “Zong! #20:”

```
this necessity of loss
this quantity of not
perils of underwriters
insurers

of
the throw in circumstance
the instance in attempt
the attempt in voyage
```
the may in become. (35)

In the first stanza, the series of oxymoronic oppositions emphasize the uncertainty that is explicitly articulated in the second stanza. The second stanza illustrates the ways in which human life is circumstantially dealt with for the profit of the slave trade. The poem culminates in the decisive moment in which the captain and the crew deliberate on the fates of the slaves they carry:

now the question falls upon enemies, (36)

Philip reminds the readers of the hopeless situation onboard Zong. Most significantly, her multifaceted commentary is directed towards the veracity of the extant historical accounts. Since testimonies of the incident have been long silenced and thus omitted from historical documentation, Philip seeks an alternative route to shed light on the atrocities of the slave trade. Her attempt to rationalize the circumstances reaches its climax in the last poem of her first chapter, which is translated as “Bones.” In “Zong #26,” Philip reflects on the rationale underlying the ordeal:

was the cause was the remedy was the record was the argument was the delay was the evidence was overboard was the not was the cause was the was was the need was the case was the perils was the want was the particular circumstance was the seas was the costs was the could was the would was the policy was the loss… …was the declaration was the apprehension was the voyage was destroyed was thrown was the question was the therefore was the this was the that was the negroes was the cause (45).
In summarizing the factors contributing to the outcome of this historical catastrophe—be they as transient as chance and wind, or as institutionalized and systemic as the slave trade that ravaged Africa and established colonial empires in the New World—Philip attempts to excavate the trauma of enslavement both personal and collective. Her reasoning concludes that it was the “negroes” that “was the cause”, acknowledging the fetishization of the black body, the proliferation of plantation logistics and the historical imperative for colonial profit. Significantly, her conclusion offers a sardonic commentary on the ways in which black life is curtailed in the colonial archive. In becoming the object of colonial desire and a metric of profitability, black life seems to lack agency unless it is to be held accountable of the perilous fate that befalls it. The poem, like every other poem in the chapter, remains open-ended, stripped of punctuation marks and thus uncontained; it remains exposed to signify its porosity, as well as the prolonging of its concerns in time.

The next chapter entitled “Sal,” for Salt, immerses the readers into the sea amidst the slaves thrown overboard. The testimonies that surface create a spatiotemporal portal and instigate anxiety for their survival as the captives are devoured by the waves:

\begin{align*}
& \text{cam} \quad \text{pon his head row} \\
& \text{fo mi a fez} \quad \text{row row the raft} \\
& \text{de man him} \\
& \text{nig nig} \quad \text{how ori} \\
& \text{a gin nig} \\
& \text{nig} \\
& \text{omí} \quad \text{omí} \quad \text{ori ob} \\
& \text{nog &} \quad \text{omi} \\
& \text{oh} \\
& \text{wa} \\
& \text{wa} \\
& \text{soif she stirs} \\
& \text{ter j’ai} \\
& \text{my thirst} \tag{74}
\end{align*}
The text evokes the multivocal soundscape, as the languages of the captives conflate and collide with English to produce utterances that are almost unintelligible, given their mutilation and the muffling effect of the waves. The main topic as exhibited in the abstract above is confusion over the conditions under which they are getting thrown into the sea. Once again, the idiosyncratic composition of the poem, both in form and content, aims to transmit the experience of confusion to the reader as well. The readers therefore witness a process in which cognition is nulled, as the captives are unable to comprehend a semiotic system whose codes they do not possess.  

This synesthetic experience is put into practice in the next chapter as well. “Ventus,” is arranged on the page through the visual imagery of letters being chased by the wind. While the thematic content remains to a great extent the same, still revolving around the personal narratives of the captives and their ailing struggle for survival, the growing intensity of the struggle is indicated primarily through visual means. In the last segment of the poem, mingling voices illustrate the ferociouslyness and brutality of the crew against the captives:

```
did       I did       how many
you did   we        drum
they      a sound how
rude      dance
seek      always
eyes      the
the bard  mourns...(98)
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As the crew discusses the numbers of the captives that have to be thrown overboard, the denigrating comments towards the captives’ culture accompany them to their deaths. Their cries

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7 The glossary provided by Philip at the end of the book, announces to the reader that violence, water, and thirst are the primary topics of discussion amongst the voices heard in the passage.
8 Latin, “wind.”
for help as they are thrown overboard resonate in the final lines of the poem. The captives’ final words occupy the liminal space between life and death, a space similar to that of social death, as imposed by slavery. In the poem, Philip strategically places “lord” between “life” and “death” in the visual rendering of the poem to indicate this liminality. While the captives are imploring for assistance, expressing their hunger and thirst, the crew appears to be rationally working through the implementation of their plan, without resentment or remorse:

lord of life of death
moi ai aide
de mo i aid
em oi...
dance
rk them
ai soif...

The poem culminates in a rhythmic alliteration of “d” sounds into a single utterance, “…done,” to indicate the demise of those thrown overboard and to confirm that the atrocious act is indeed committed (98). However the alliterative tension between “dance” and “done” suggests a site of performative resistance that adds to the visual and affective outcome of the poem.

**Palimpsest**

The final chapters of the book, composed as a hybrid visual and auditory archive of the Zong case aim to acknowledge the African captives, who perished at sea. (insert image). “Ebora,” meaning Underwater Spirits, presents an alternative account of the testimonies of the enslaved.
Its visual rendering with superimposed words in lighter pigmentation is indicative of the palimpsestic rewriting of history, as each utterance revisits and revises the previous. The pluralistic element that prevails in the reverberation of the voices in Ebora is also indicative of the polyphony enabled through archival work. These qualities are inextricably linked to the storytelling that Philip is invested in; evolving, disruptive and transformative, in an attempt to revisit and revise the historical archive.

Not a Story to Pass on: Beloved

“none of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but knowing the things behind the things.”
-Morrison, Beloved

In Beloved, a girl emerges from the water and makes her way to a house that is arguably haunted, “filled with touches from the other side” (B 116). Her name remains unknown, her story obscure. She is instead called Beloved. The novel recounts the haunting aftermath of slavery using historical clues from the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave. Although several aspects of the story differ from Margaret Garner’s in notable ways, Morrison’s Beloved revisits the

9 What I am referring to as the polyphony of archival work is a twofold concept that reflects the democratic potential of the archive. Although there is no physical extant archive in the Zong case on behalf of the slaves onboard the ship, Philip attempts to reconstruct one by imagining the voices of those who perished. These voices are disparate and diverse, indicating that there is no singular story to be told, but rather multiple individual stories of loss and dispossession. Similarly, the readers participate in the polyphony of the archive by making connections according to their intellectual quest, thus enabling multiple overlaying interpretations to emerge.

10 The protagonist of the novel, Sethe, like Garner, ran away from slavery and crossed the frozen Ohio river, only to enjoy her freedom for a few weeks. When her former Master approached to re-enslave her family, Sethe killed her daughter and was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Margaret Garner was initially imprisoned but was never formally tried despite the fact that abolitionists at the time were diligently petitioning for it. Instead she was considered property and was promptly returned to her master, who soon afterwards resold her further South. Her traces disappear on the way to her new owner. Sethe’s story as narrated by Morrison is similar, but after her imprisonment along with her new born daughter, Sethe is allowed to return to her home in Ohio, as her Master perceives of her as “spoiled goods,” and therefore no longer suitable or dependable to work in the plantation. This change not only propels the
historical archive to give voice to the testimonies of enslavement that remain silenced. Unlike Gregson V. Gilbert, which offers little description of the events onboard the ship, historical records on the Garner incident comprise of gruesome detail. Sensational accounts of the events emerge from three sources: the writings of Levi Coffin, a prominent Ohio abolitionist; Cincinnati newspapers, in which the story briefly appeared as a news sensation; and via correspondence exchanged between Ohio juridical authorities debating whether Garner should be tried for murder or returned to her former owner as property.

Similar to Gregson v. Gilbert, the latter documents bring to light the struggle for black life to be disengaged from discourses of property, a focal tenet ofabolitionist agenda at the time. Upon Garner’s capture, when her story gained its short-lived momentum in local Cincinnati newspapers, the abolitionist side pressed for a trial that would reconfigure Garner’s status as human rather than as property. According to the Ohio History Connection archive,

[Garner’s] case was the longest fugitive slave hearing of the era, as the judge deliberated whether she and her accomplices should be tried as property under the Fugitive Slave Law or tried as persons and charged with murder. Her defense attorneys argued that she should be tried for murder, hoping that her case would be held in the free state of Ohio where she could later be pardoned for her crimes.

Inspite of abolitionists’ efforts, the archive indicates vehement resistance to acknowledge Garner’s humanity. The Commissioner perceived of Garner’s short return to the plantation, which preceded her fleeing, as “a voluntary return to slavery after a visit to a free state” (Gordon 157). According to his deliberation, her return “re-attached the conditions of slavery and

[therefore rendered the] fugitives …legally slaves at the time of their escape” (Gordon 157). It narrative forward, but also creates space for the redemption of the character and the recuperation of her humanity.
was therefore ruled that the Fugitive Slave Law took precedence, and Garner was promptly returned to slavery.

The outcome of the legal case proved detrimental for Garner. According to all official accounts, she remained a non-juridical subject. The convoluted legal rhetoric deployed by the commissioner circumvented Garner’s rights, but more importantly embalmed her in a romanticized discourse that perpetuated antebellum demarcations between North and South, free states and slave states. Contemplated from the standpoint of white colonial privilege, the commissioner’s view indicates his utter disregard for the forces of domination that ordain race relations to this day. As Gordon explains, at this instance Garner is “only what a property contract promises, a transaction of exchange value. In spite of touching appeals, in spite of the defiant claim she made to be a mother, a legal and social oxymoron in the context of slavery, Margaret Garner’s predicament remain[ed] a question of property” (Gordon 160).

This description of motherhood as a “legal and social oxymoron” amidst slavery is an acute representation of the objectified and dispossessed status of black femininity. In *Beloved*, Paul D, the estranged friend of Sethe from Sweet Home¹², warns her upon witnessing her maternal affection, that “for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (B 54). His comment, a lucid reflection on the operation of plantation economies, provides contextual information for the readers, reminding them that enslaved females were considered a lucrative investment. Through her ability to procreate, Sethe became incubus for the production of more financial assets for her master. Born under slavery, her offspring was the master’s property and he was therefore able to utilize, trade, or dispose of them as he saw fit. In *Beloved*, this is evident not only in the

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¹² Sweet Home is the plantation in which Sethe spent most of her adult life, the place she eventually fled from. “Sweet Home” is an additional oxymoron in this context and a euphemism for the processes and deeds taking place in the household.
catastrophic events brought on by the Schoolmaster’s attempt to recapture Sethe and her children, but also in the life narrative of Baby Suggs. The elderly matriarch who serves as a spiritual compass for the black community laments the fact that her freedom was granted to her only after her younger son bought it with his own servitude.

Extensive scholarly work on the disruption of kinship ties in the context of slavery emphasizes the disposable status of slave offspring, and the dissolution of nuclear family structures amongst enslaved populations. Hortense Spillers argues in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar book,” that “captive persons were forced into patterns of dispersal, beginning with the Trade itself, into the horizontal relatedness of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement” (75). Mostly evident in Zong!, Spillers’ observation is also valid in the case of Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe raises her children. “Certainly if kinship were possible,” Spillers writes “the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then “belong” to a father or a mother,” but in the absence of the recognition of kinship, “… genetic reproduction [in the plantation] becomes … an extension …of proliferating properties” (75).¹³ Similarly in Monstrous Intimacies, Christina Sharpe argues that the desire for kinship is denied and disavowed in “spaces (real or imagined) of limited choice, of (in)humanity and the exercise of everyday tyranny” (20) such as that of the plantation. Along the same lines, Saidiya Hartman, in her discussion of dispossession during slavery and in its contemporary afterlives argues that:

If slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship it is because African American kinship has been at once the site of intense state surveillance and pathologization, which leads to

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¹³ In Corregidora by Gayl Jones (discussed in Chapter II) procreation becomes a way of sustaining mnemonic structures that ensure the survival of testimony. This is attained by the production of a genealogy of women passing down the experience of slavery from one generation to the next. A moment of conflict, indicative of the friction embedded in notions of kinship in the African American community, arises when Mutt, Ursa’s husband describes this strategy as “a slave breeder’s way of thinking.” (22)
the double bind of being subject to normalizing pressures within the context of continuing social and political delegitimation. As a result it is not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations (and conceiving persons as property) and from the fictions of “bloodline,” as well as the national and racial interests by which these lines are sustained. (15)

In *Beloved*, Sethe encounters the specter of the daughter she killed in an act propelled by her desire for agency and emancipation, a daughter who returns as an adult to claim her space in the household, as well as a place in the archive of enslavement. Beloved’s appellation, itself a cluster of affective investment, connotes the profound maternal affection that Sethe feels for her daughter, as well as her attempt to ground her in a history of institutionalized recognition.

Beloved’s return, her insistence to know Sethe’s story, and the ruinous effect that she has on her surroundings, are indicative of the haunting aftermath of slavery. By depicting Beloved as an embodied spectral presence, Morrison, like Philip and Gordon, attempts to achieve “unity with the dead,” and to emphasize the lasting imprint of violence and dispossession. More than an act of archival recuperation, Morrison’s authorial investment lies in exploring the resonance of slavery and its traumatic aftermath in the lives and legacies of African Americans in the United States. As Stephanie Smallwood writes in *Saltwater Slavery*, “those who survived the slaveship were haunted by the rhythm of untimely fatality,” and by the constant grip of unfreedom that permeated the social configurations of the black community (193). As a result, the figure of Beloved, a conflation of the corporeal and the spectral, is a potent emblem, utilized by Morrison to shed light on the convoluted nuances of slavery and its aftermath. Gordon argues that, “for Morrison social memory is not just history, but haunting; not just context, but animated worldliness; not just the hard ground of infrastructural matters, but the shadowy grip of ghostly matters” (166). Beloved is therefore a story “about haunting and about the crucial way in which it mediates between institution and person, creating the possibility of making a life, of becoming
something else, in the present and for the future” (Gordon 142). However, in order for the generative potential of the story to be fulfilled, a deconstructive process needs to be initiated, one that is painful and thoroughly disruptive. Beloved, the personification of the traumas of slavery becomes a catalyst as the story unravels. She is, to the world of the novel as well as to the readers, the visual signifier of the history of slavery. She becomes the personification of those lost, those whose spectral presence and persistent memory demands recognition, and eventually she vanishes as conspicuously as she appeared.

**Tell Me Your Diamonds**

Similarly to *Zong!*, *Beloved* reflects a departure from language. “This is not a story to be passed on,” Morrison exclaims, and the world of the novel appears to espouse this belief. Sethe continues living amongst them in isolation; yet, in the few instances in which the story resurfaces it has detrimental impact for her life, social and private. When Denver, the surviving daughter, finds out her family’s past at school, she quits and becomes a recluse. Sethe’s personal life is again shattered when an old newspaper clipping is presented to Paul D, informing him of her atrocious deed. When the story surfaces, in either visual or verbal modality, doom ensues.

Written iterations of her life narrative make Sethe feel unease, which is not surprising considering how written discourse appears to entrap and disenfranchise her throughout the novel. Back in Sweet Home, the Schoolmaster and his students observe the enslaved Africans on the plantation to draw conclusions on their physical differences from their Caucasian counterparts. Sethe revolts and contemplates leaving when she realizes that she is the object of a study that aims to enumerate her human and “animalistic” characteristics. Sethe contributes to her entrapment in this narrative of dispossession and objectification through her labor, as in fact she
is making the ink for the study notes to be put on paper. The trauma of her involuntary complicity in the production and perpetuation of her enclosure in narrative makes all the more evident the ways in which the historical archive fails those in the periphery of colonial power structures.

Beloved’s spectral presence allows Morrison to engage in some verbal explication, without shaking her authorial commitment to undo language in the process of storytelling. Unlike Sethe, Beloved is elusive to the firm grip of written discourse. The stories about her are vague, obscure and inconclusive. Beloved appears to initiate Sethe’s narration as a means to look into the past. In turn, Sethe relies on storytelling as a means to nurture Beloved. When Beloved asks her to “Tell [her her] diamonds,” Sethe proceeds with relaying stories of her youth under slavery, which culminate in her fleeing and the disastrous outcome of Schoolmaster’s attempt to recapture her (B 69). It is noteworthy however that Beloved’s knowledge about the lost diamonds is one of the first indications of her identity as Sethe’s daughter. In “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Jean Wyatt argues that “tell me your diamonds” defines Beloved’s relation to Sethe in accordance with the mother infant dynamic in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Wyatt posits that, Sethe’s “desire to regain the maternal closeness of a nursing baby powers a dialogue that fuses pronoun positions and abolishes punctuation, undoing all the marks of punctuation that usually stabilize language” (474). This textual rendering, similar to that of *Zong!*, illuminates the porous relation between language and meaning and alludes to an affective connection that is more meaningful that the one achieved through cognition.

Sethe’s diamonds similarly function as a bond between the two women, one that is premised on intimacy and insight. Sethe’s battle for emancipation is visually codified in the
symbol of the diamond, which creates a visible beacon for the audience and the protagonists to “behold.” In this way they serve as potent narrative hooks, grounding the narrative and fixating the readers’ attention to a sensory stimulus embedded in the process of storytelling. With this switch of emphasis from the textual to the visual the reader is immersed in the story, and through the palpable visibility of the earrings assumes her place in Sethe’s household, ostensibly sharing with the protagonists the same sensory input. To fully understand the symbolic magnitude of the diamond earrings in the narrative, it is worth pondering the moment in which Sethe acquired them. Upon hearing of her marriage, Sethe’s Mistress decided to bequeath her the earrings, in an act that ceremonially inaugurates Sethe’s adult life, while it also becomes a simultaneous conferral of the Mistress’ white privilege. Marriage, like maternity, is in the context of slavery an additional oxymoron. The diamonds therefore signify Sethe’s inclusion in an institutionalized practice, that of marriage, which her enslaved status prevented her from legally enjoying. As a result, the diamonds encapsulate the battle for liberation that Sethe undergoes in various stages of her life, from being entrapped in the realm of white supremacy to fleeing from it. Etymologically, “diamond” stems from Ancient Greek “αδαμάς,” meaning unbreakable, signifying Sethe’s resilience. Moreover, the organic formation of the diamond, carbon undergoing immense pressure for eons to yield what is considered one of the most valuable and resilient gems, is an allusion to the history of slavery and the perseverance of black life. Sethe exercises a maternal duty through narration that she has been deprived of in real life. According to Morrison, telling her story “became a way to feed [Beloved, as Sethe] learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling.”

14 Similar to the way that the white man’s hat serves as a signifier of impeding danger in Beloved. See below “…a Major Incumbent and Sleight of Hand.”
Un-telling “It”

The embattled relationship between storytelling and language might be attributed to Morrison’s statement that “this is not a story to be passed on.” Post Paid, the elderly man who secured passage for runaway slaves into Ohio confronts Baby Suggs when she decides to retreat into her home and seek solace in observing “the beauty of harmless colors” (B 167). “You can't quit the Word,” he says, “I don’t care what all happen to you... you got to do it,” yet Baby Suggs, resists his call to bear witness in ways compliant with the logic of language. In the same way, Sethe differentiates between word and sound towards the end of the novel when she reflects on the residue of traumatic memory: “in the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was sound, and they all knew what sound sounded like.” In this excerpt, Morrison performs a swift meta-textual maneuver to emphasize her conviction that fragments of language, mere phonetic clusters, convey through the evocation of the senses a testimony that is more truthful than that conveyed through language (B 305). Bearing witness does not rely upon verbal explication and the transmission of historical data, as those are a priori conditioned, but rather on the embodied experience of enslavement and the ways through which it can be retrieved through the senses.

These sounds, similar to the soundscape onboard Zong, oftentimes have a disruptive effect. Morrison in Beloved asks the readers to look out for the moments when “the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (B 308). The veracity and emancipatory potential of a narrative based on its auditory affect is evident in the stories of Sethe’s origins. Sethe is an outlier in the context of slavery for having enjoyed, even briefly, the privilege of having a family, unlike her mother. When Sethe inquired about her mother, “what Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she
told it in…but the message—that was and had been there all along” (B 74 emphasis mine).

Communicating the traumatic legacy of slavery is not therefore solely dependent on verbal discourse, but more importantly on the affective outcome and the sensory impact that the story has on the reader without employing language in the process.

In the novel, storytelling is an arduous task, one of struggle and excision. Narrating one’s trauma is equally difficult to hearing that of others. Although, Sethe values her story and is aware of the effort necessary for its articulation, she reflects on the validity of her narrative: “Maybe you can hear it. I just ain’t sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean…” (B 85). Sethe’s statement illustrates the inability of language to delineate the experience of dispossession, while it simultaneously bolsters the view that affect, or the sensory output of the story are more suitable for its dissemination. She is thinking to herself that, “if she wanted them to know and was strong enough to get through the telling, she would” (B 63). Yet she refrains from engaging verbal discourse in relaying her trauma. Instead she uses potent imagery to signify the full dimensions of her hardship. This imagery is not only explicit in showing the violence that she has been subjugated to, but also fosters the possibility of healing: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they would not see it, they could not have it” (B 103 emphasis mine). This transition from disrupting, or effacing, the verbal to engendering the visual is the focus of the next segment.

“…a Major Incumbent and Sleight of Hand.”

“Not one spoke to the other. At least not with words.
The eyes has to tell what there was to tell”
Morrison - Beloved (127)
As discussed in previous segments, Morrison’s strategy to use the specter of Beloved as an embodied presence in the novel serves a crucial purpose. Similar to the decisions underlying Philip’s narrative choices in *Zong!*, Morrison’s decision functions as a means to immerse the reader in the landscape of slavery. Morrison writes that,

to invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape [of slavery] (hidden but not completely; deliberately buried but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts… I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population – just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense. (xviii)

Making the experience of abduction, enslavement and dispossession palpable is therefore an important goal for Morrison, who similar to Philip, appeals to the affective lexicon of her audience and imbues her narrative with visual and auditory clues. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” a year after the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison explicates on the introductory segment of her novel and on what she wanted for her readers to experience through it. She writes, “I wanted the compelling confusion of being there as they (the characters) are; suddenly, without comfort or succor from the ‘author,’ with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey” (UTU 161). To disorient her readers, Morrison loosens the temporal continuum of the narrative, allowing the specter of Beloved to traverse it, and refrains from the seductive lure of closure that language offers. “[There was] no time,” Morrison writes, “because memory, prehistoric memory, has no time. There is just a little music, each other, and the urgency of what is at stake. Which is all they had. For that work, the work of language is to get out of the way” (UTU 162).16 Disengaging from the “work of language” therefore creates a void

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16 Language is of immense importance to Morrison; however, its importance lies in its disruption as well as in its utilization by the author. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken, Morrison writes: “What makes a
similar to that of the liminal presence of Beloved: visually present, yet physically beyond the temporal framework of enslavement. Her presence is a visual manifestation of the invisible, an embodiment of the loss incurred by slavery, of the empty space in Sethe’s life caused by the loss of her daughter. Morrison draws attention to the mechanics of this maneuver: “We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there’; that a void might be empty but not be a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose…” (UTU 136). Beloved as a corporeal presence is the personification of the “stressed,” “ornate absences” that “call attention to themselves.” This is a necessity for the narrative that needs to be rendered masterfully for the move from language to affect to be achieved, or as Morrison argues, “[the fully realized presence of the haunting] is both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of hand” (UTU 161).

Other than the vivid imagery that Beloved’s specter offers, images of traumatic events emerge from the narrative and connote Sethe’s entrapment in slavery’s limbo. These images are persistent and recurrent, creating a moving landscape that Sethe inhabits against her will. Past events remain palpable to Sethe, who develops her own theory of why this is happening: “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory…what I remember is a picture floating out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think of it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place that it happened” (B 43). The concept of “rememory” is crucial in the context of enslavement and trauma, as it doesn’t merely indicate what can be remembered (memory), but rather what can be recurrently and persistently recalled, visually reconstructed from scratch due to its lasting impact. This

work “black”? The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction the one most fraught, is its language—its unpolicied, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language” (136).
rememory has a very palpable, physical presence. It is “a thought picture [which you can] bump into [even if it] belongs to someone else” (Beloved 43). Reliving what has occurred, on both a personal and a collective level, is therefore inescapable, and so is the incurrent pain from such an encounter. “Why was there nothing [her brain] refused?” Sethe thinks to herself, “no misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept” (Beloved 83). Palpable images of past events, Sethe’s rememory, are therefore a suggestive way in which the experience of slavery is relived by the characters and communicated to the readers. The ocular in the novel performs another vital function, as it is associated with an alternate epistemology, one dissociated from language and invested in what can be inferred through vision and affect. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon emphasizes the way in which visual stimuli in the novel signify impeding danger. Construed in her mind as indicative of terror, the recollection of Schoolmaster’s hat becomes Sethe’s tipping point when years later a white abolitionist shows up on her doorstep. His hat serves as the visual signifier of domination, which throws Sethe into manic rage. This seemingly unreasonable reaction draws attention to the loose connection between affect and the field of cognition. Although the causal relation between the hat and impeding danger is not verbally articulated, the visual stimulus is overwhelmingly palpable, and therefore Sethe proceeds to attack and annihilate the bearer. Gordon argues that this process requires no verbal explication as it is triggered by the “ritualistic recognition of the signs of violence and refusal. There is no explanation not because she cannot provide one, but because what we could just call culture, a synthetic tradition of reading and responding to signs [provides one by default]” (Gordon 163). Visual perception illuminates the impasse between affect and cognition both for the characters and for the readers in a meta-textual sense. Being able to decipher the visual cues offered in abundance in the text is a crucial task that the readers are called to perform, for in order “to get to
the ghost story, it is necessary to understand how something as simple as a hat can be profoundly and profanely illuminating if you know how to read the signs” (Gordon 164).

“You finished with your eyes?”

After the outing in the woods that reconstitutes the three of them as family, Beloved asks Sethe: “You finished with your eyes?” Her question addresses Sethe’s crying, yet in the context of the novel evokes a spectrum of functions that the ocular performs, as vision conspicuously allows for entrapment and enables freedom. On the one hand, Sethe strives to get “out of sight of Master’s sight” (B 125), and on the other, Denver is aware of the agency her vision affords her, agency that goes beyond the realm of language: “for two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration, but which gave her eyes a power she found hard to believe” (B 121). The emancipatory power of the ocular is also premised on the fact that through it characters are able to access what they have previously been denied. Denver acquires external validation through Beloved’s eyes, as she feels not merely accepted, but also present: “It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other” (B 139). Similarly, Sethe acquires agency as an emancipated woman through the visual. Upon returning from the “pilgrimage” to the opening with her daughters, Sethe thinks to herself: “we must look a sight” … “and close[s] her eyes to see it” (B 114). Being able to exercise her gaze upon herself and her daughters, Sethe manages to subvert the scopic regimes imposed by plantation laws. Similarly, being able to voluntarily command one’s gaze has the potential to protect the beholder. In the instance of Beloved’s demand that Paul D has sex with her, Paul D attempts to flee his desire by averting his gaze, thinking that “as long as his eyes were locked on the silver of the lard can he was safe” (B 137).
The insurgent function of vision is epitomized in the text through the trope of ocular hunger deployed by Morrison. Hunger, to look and to be looked at, provides an alternative means, beyond verbal narrative, to attain recognition and empowerment. For instance, when Sethe narrates to Denver the events surrounding her birth she mentions someone passing by: “I was hungry… just as hungry as I could have been for his eyes. I couldn’t wait,” she recalls. Sethe’s desire to attack and cannibalize the unknown man goes away when she realizes that the bystander was a white girl. Her hunger for his eyes, however, shows her desire to fight back on the verge of death, as she lay in the ditch with very few hopes of survival. Sethe’s desire to annihilate her opponent is fueled by the longing to acquire his eyes for herself, as they symbolically stand for the faculties reproducing white hegemonic discourse. Similarly, in other points in the novel the characters’ eyes are given life of their own, and perform functions like humans. This anthropomorphism is evident when Sethe contemplates the arrival of Paul D, and “how much her eyes enjoyed looking at his face” (B 56), while it is also evident in the devouring attention that Beloved pays Sethe, who is “licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (B68).

Through multiple references to the function that eyes play in the novel, Morrison trains her readers to look out for the ocular in the text. As a result of her meta-textual maneuver, we, as readers, engage in an exercise of heuristics and immerse ourselves in the palpable imagery of the book, and more importantly to the landscape of slavery.

In the previous segments, I focused on the ways in which Philip and Morrison engage the reader in a storytelling that appeals to the senses, in an effort to resist the totalitarian rule of language. Their choice, I have argued, contests the narrative of enslavement in the colonial archive as manifest through language. However, there is another impetus for the narration of embodied historical catastrophes through the senses, for as Elizabeth Alexander argues, black
Americans experience dispossession and disenfranchisement viscerally, against the grain of official historical accounts that point to emancipation as a liberating moment for black Americans in the continent. In the next segment, I will be addressing the disparate forms of feeling that emerge from such sensory evocations of enslavement, and I will be discussing the differences between sentimentality, empathy and affect as they relate to the genre of the slave narrative.

II. Mutable Worlds, Malleable Words.

The texts examined in this chapter, *Zong!* and *Beloved*, appear to share little in terms of form and genre. A book length poem, *Zong!* is paired with a Notanda and a Glossary, which function as keys to decipher the poem. *Beloved* is a novel that veers off conventional novel topics and is in turn interspersed with stream of consciousness segments that pay tribute to the experience of the Middle Passage. Both texts relay the experience of enslavement and aim to reclaim the humanity of those lost at sea or sold as cattle, and in so doing serve as contemporary iterations of slave narratives.

In this second segment of this chapter, I examine a conundrum endemic in the genre of the slave narrative. The underlying premise for the production and dissemination of slave narratives in the long 19th century was to expose the immoral nature of slavery and to contribute to the abolitionist cause. Accounts of the Middle Passage conventionally emerged in slave narratives and served to illuminate the conditions enslaved Africans faced onboard slave ships. As figurative vessels of the experience of enslavement, narratives of the Middle Passage emulate the trajectory of the physical vessel, from the moment of capture, to the ultimate subordination
and dehumanization of the enslaved subject. Their emancipatory promise lies on the telling, as the authorial voice testifies to the atrocities of slavery and demands acknowledgement and representation.

In spite of their ostensibly liberating potential, slave narratives require a set of authenticating mechanisms that curtail their emancipatory promise. Embedded in the formative terrain of white privilege, they form a peculiar textual confrontation, one that materializes along the axis of black liberation and the validation of the narratives’ truthfulness by a predominantly white audience. The validation procured by the white patron, as well as the anticipation that the narrative will be perceived as authentic by the white reader, serve as structural bookends for the story of enslavement; resulting in the deterioration of the black author’s agency. In this segment, I argue that Philip and Morrison revise the genre of the slave narrative, in an attempt to engender an alternative archive of the Middle Passage; one unmediated by white privilege. By upsetting reader expectations of narrative closure; striping the slave narrative from the authenticating mechanisms of white privilege; and finally by relying on extra-discursive, sensory stimuli rather than on verbal rhetoric, Philip and Morrison seek new venues to relay narratives of enslavement that do not undermine the liberating potential of the black narrative voice. In this way they engage in a palimpsestic rewriting of history, as each of their narratives revises and reinscribes existing accounts of the Middle Passage.

In order to illustrate my argument I will be reading comparatively short segments of three different genres –three different slave narratives –to show the shift that is happening overtime in relation to black authorial voice. Written in 1789, my first text is Olaudah Equiano’s “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,” a text that has received extensive scholarly attention and served its purpose very well at the time of
publication. The other two, are the texts previously examined in this chapter, *Beloved* and *Zong*.

Equiano’s narrative abides by the rhetorical maneuvers of early slave narratives. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that slave narratives contest the humanity of their authorial voices, as in spite of the ostensible empowerment they assign to the author, they also include mechanisms for his subordination to white privilege. According to Gates, “the slave’s texts… could only be read as a testimony of defilement: the slave’s *representation* of the master’s attempts to transform a human being into commodity, and the slave’s simultaneous verbal witness of the possession of a ‘humanity’ shared in common with Europeans” (52). This rhetorical maneuver is problematic for both Gates and Gordon, who writes in *Ghostly Matters*, that “the complex articulation of this double bind—I testify to my transformation into a Slave, while I testify to the existence of my shared humanity with you—is what the slave narrative was asked to express” (145). The former assertion implies reliving the trauma of enslavement and is often accompanied by narratives abundant with gore, which perpetuate a vicarious witnessing of violence, as Saidiya Hartman notes in *Scenes of Subjection*. The latter statement is an issue of audience as much as it is an acknowledgement of one’s subordination to the hierarchal power structures at play within the readership/author dynamic. Taking the audience into account, it is therefore reasonable for conventional slave narratives to relay the unethical nature of slavery, as an issue yet to be confronted given their temporal framework. As Gordon asserts, “[slave narratives] tried to make the agony and moral illegitimacy of slavery *palpably* present and to create a relationship between reader and slave so that, in the best of narratives, the nexus of force, desire, belief, and practice that made slavery possible, could be exposed and abolished” (143 emphasis mine).
Equiano’s narrative is structured along the formative principles of this genre, which commits violence similar to that of enslavement, as I previously discussed. Equiano announces in the introductory letter to his white readership, which is later on elaborately listed by name, that: “I am, My LORDS AND GENTLEMEN, Your most obedient, And devoted humble servant.” He proceeds with solidifying the authenticity of his narrative, and asks his readers to “permit [him], with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at [their] feet the following genuine narrative…” The subservient tone and imagery Equiano employs in his narration reaches its apex in the last segment of his introduction, when he pleads with the readers to “be acquitted of boldness and presumption” for “addressing [them] a work so wholly devoid of literary merit.” In an effort to curtail resulting feelings of unrest from his audience, Equiano commits a self-deprecating rhetorical move and proclaims himself an unlettered African. Equiano’s reliance of the language of the colonizer is also evident in his descriptive passages, where stylistically over-embellished segments attempt to instigate an emotive reaction in his audience. In his second Chapter Equiano reminisces about his experience of the Middle Passage:

I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.

What is prevalent in this segment, alongsides Equiano’s loss of agency, symbolically culminating in his fall on the deck unconscious, is the fact that the encounter with the Europeans is a horrific exchange. He is at once diminished to chattel, treated as property, and being
subjected to violence and brutalization, but all of this is happening *in relation* to the sight of the overseers, who are in command of his fate. His narrative is therefore a means to redress this subjugation. Indeed, as Lisa Lowe notes, Equiano’s autobiography is a seminal text for the subsequent production of slave narratives, as it “stylized the conversion from chattel to liberal subject;” it “negotiated the voices of abolition and slave resistance;” and it “mediated the logics of coloniality in which trade in people and goods connected Africa, plantation Virginia, the colonial West Indies, and metropolitan England” (101). Indeed the genre might be limited in resolving the “contradictions of colonial slavery,” but it does achieve the contextualization of these disparate spaces and dynamics within one discourse, that of enslavement from the viewpoint of the emancipated black subject.

Seeking to revert the hierarchical ordering of black subject and white audience embedded in the slave narrative, contemporary writers resort to other genres and rhetorical maneuvers to describe the experience of the Middle Passage.

In *Beloved* the spectral presence of a woman emerging from the water with no prior recollection of her identity, becomes the embodied visualization of the thousands of captives, who were unwillingly trafficked across the Atlantic to slavery. The segment on the experience of the Middle Passage is provided without any contextualization, taking the readers aback, almost entrapping them in a space of confinement and intense confusion. This metatextual move resembles life on board the slave ship, where confinement, unsanitary conditions, and linguistic confusion exacerbated the torturous circumstances of the captives. The asphyxiating atmosphere and the sensory overstimulation that the fragmented language engenders in this segment force the reader to consider the experience of the Middle Passage from the standpoint of an enslaved woman onboard the slave ship. The segment reads: “I am Beloved and she is mine… All of it is
now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked” (248). The fusion of personas and pronouns, as well as the lack of punctuation and context intensify the confusion of the reader and connote his immersion into the terrain and soundscape of the Middle Passage. Unlike Equiano’s narrative, an authenticating mechanism enforcing white privilege is missing in this case. Rather, the palpable quality of the narrative, engendered through potent sensory elements, attests to its veracity as lived experience and triggers a forceful affective pull. In this way, according to Gordon, Morrison “revises the slave narrative in at least two ways germane to [the engagement of the sensory field]. First, Morrison rejects literacy as the supreme measure of humanity, but more significantly, she refuses the task of having to prove the slaves’... humanity” (147). Knowledge in the novel is therefore not associated with literacy, but rather with emotive perception, particularly seeing. For example, when Denver, the youngest of the two daughters, comes to terms with the legacy of slavery in her family history, it registers in the text in visual and sensory terms, which are in turn mediated through empathy: “Denver was seeing it now, and feeling it—through Beloved” (B 91). By engaging the ocular, Morrison discredits the potency of written accounts and signifies an epistemological shift that alludes the perceived incredulity towards language. This shift also indicates a strong affinity with the vantage point of the dispossessed, whose testimonies have been silenced and excluded from written accounts of enslavement. Morrison’s take on the slave narrative is indicative of her desire to disassociate it from the traditional means by which its liberating potential is attained.

An important shift that is happening at this point is the veering from the personal, manifest in autobiography, to the emblematic (Beloved standing as the corporeal conjuring of
those who survived or perished during the Middle Passage). “The slave narrative was not an autobiographical account,” Gordon emphasizes, but more significantly “a sociology of slavery and freedom” (143). The emphasis of autobiography on the personal undermines the effort to redress the collective, particularly when the authorial voice is seen in the light of exceptionalism, like Equiano. However, NourbeSe Philip, in *Zong!* demands collective recognition for the victims that perished in the Zong Massacre. The collective history that she seeks does not imply that the captives shall remain nameless. In the same way that Equiano lists his white readership, Philip instead ends her poems with making up names for her ancestors lost at sea, in an attempt to redress the violence of the Middle Passage, which diminished humans to chattel. Philip describes her efforts as propelled by an hauntological concern, a perhaps more historically bound offshoot of ontology, keeping into account recurrent debates on the impossibility of redress within critical race theory. *Zong!, therefore, presents Philip with an ontological as well as with a hauntological challenge. Through the narrative conjuring of the senses, visual, auditory and haptic clues create the picture, soundscape, and lived experience of the Middle Passage. Philip encounters the ghostly, reinstates it as visible, dismantles the language that describes it, and thus offers a multivalent sensorium, which turns the text into a chronotope and an artefact of the experience of the Middle Passage. This imaginative archival recuperation, is performed in visual terms in a twofold manner; primarily via the form that the poem takes on the page, and secondarily through the generative power of her verse, which aims to recreate the space of the Black Atlantic for the readers. Through the imaginative rendering of her words on the physical book, Philip offers a formative stipulation that enables the reality of bondage to emerge from the pages. Moreover the evocation of the physical space of the Black Atlantic, through visual and auditory cues within the text, creates a portal for the readers to be immersed in the waters of
omission and to come out with their own understanding of the politics of the archive. Philip envisages the conditions on board the slave ship, assumes her place amongst the drowning and describes the atrocity first hand, focusing on descriptions of the corporeality of the victims and dissecting language, so that in its collapse potent visual, auditory and haptic fragments emerge.

It is, however, through performance that Philip’s text achieves its full potential. By performance, I mean both the performative aspect of Zong!’s at times dissolving, at times assertive, more often than not syntactically transgressive punctuation, as well as Philip’s masterful recitations of her poetry, which show significant variation over the years. The former, which we also encounter in the Middle Passage segments of Beloved abides by Jennifer De Vere Brody’s theory of the text’s “paradoxical performances [which] produce excessive meaning” through punctuation (10). This excessive meaning contributes to the multivalent sensorium that the text emanates indicating a generative polysemy in the reading process, which in turn hints at the different iterations of the story of enslavement within the archive (De Vere Brody 10).

The latter, is a recitation that brings the poem to life. Utilizing her own corporeal presence as a portal for that of her ancestors, Philip embarks on a performance that immerses her audience, and her readers, in the space of the slave ship, amidst the waves. In her early performances, Philip kept metronomic rhythm as she recited her poem, blurring vowels, prolonging consonants, swinging her body back and forth. Her recitation and movement assigned to the text an incantatory resonance, and her gradual passage from words to phonemes (“pure utterance”) enacted the confusion on board the ship and the muffling sound of the waves. In more recent performances, Philip engages the audience in an interactive performance in which they are immersed without prior notice. As Philip paces the room ringing a bell, rhythmically exclaiming “defend the dead,” under the sound of African drums, the audience is asked to recite
with her different segments from the book which are placed under their chairs. The polyphonic incantation, which fills the room with disparate voices, creates a sense of community across the audience, and transports them, as they are seated side by side, to the space of the slave ship. This unexpected and involuntary immersion, similar to that instigated by the abduction of the enslaved Africans onboard, creates a potent synaesthetic and affective outcome for the audience. While the setting and the means Philip utilizes to bring the text to life differ dramatically from one occasion to the other, Philip’s engagement with this space aims to recreate the conditions that captives encountered onboard the ship, and to ask her readers to affectively engage with it. Her performance is thus an embodied rhetorical maneuver, through which Philip conjures her ancestors, demands the recognition of their humanity and performs their reinscription in an alternative archive of the Middle Passage that is devoid of the confines of language. Rather, it is itself as palpable as Philip’s poetry, a conflation of hermeneutics and performance, which aims to problematize the notions of dispossession and displacement incurred through the Middle Passage. Philip’s performance embodies the affirmation that loosely circumscribed affective structures can indeed prevail over language in narrating enslavement. Rather than rely on extant archival documents and the available genres for the exploration of such narratives, Morrison and Philip urge us to consider how affect, instigated through extra-discursive sources, can revolutionize our understanding and reception of narratives of dispossession.
Chapter Two

Reclaiming the Unhomely: Emblematicity and Reappropriation as Decolonial Tropes in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* and Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*.

The abolition of slavery and the end of colonial rule are often rightfully cited as incomplete projects. This chapter considers the ways in which populations that have been historically dispossessed in the Caribbean, Brazil, and United States seek to decolonize terrains of unbelonging. The chronic reverberations of colonialism and settler capitalism are palpable in the material structures and bureaucratic formations that underpin contemporary politics. Decolonization, reparation, and redress are central to discussions of social justice taking place on a global scale. In the United States alone, contemporary forms of dispossession such as mass incarceration, police brutality, and gentrification can be traced back to slavery and racial capitalism. Contemporary artists grapple with such notions and attempt to counter the force of dispossession through a skillful repurposing of visual markers of hegemonic power. In this chapter, I read *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *The Pagoda* by Patricia Powell and examine the ways in which these two writers attempt the decolonization of public and private terrains of lived experience through emblematicity and the reappropriation of visual culture that was previously complicit in their subjugation. For example, in *Corregidora*, the jazz club fosters Ursa’s emancipatory performance and contests the dehumanization of the auction block. In *The Pagoda*, the protagonist, Mr. Lowe, seeks to leave his mark on his surroundings by building an actual Pagoda, an emblem of Chinese labor on the island; however, it is his corporeal presence and his gender passing that become emblems of the shifting and often unattainable topographies of
freedom in the New World. Finally, I argue that by seeking to recreate emancipatory emblems, the protagonists of these novels utilize affect in its visceral form, in an effort to rewire the visual tropes that colonial discourse employs to subjugate them. If emblematicity works to immediately evoke a set of associations upon one’s encounter with the emblem, a process enabled by cognition, I ask what would be the outcome of an engagement with the archive that harnesses affect as visceral feeling and sentience to counter colonial imaginaries sustained by empathic identification. In this chapter, I show how rewiring emblematicity enables a rewiring of colonial discourse, which in turn allows for the emergence of an egalitarian counter-archive.

I. A Genealogy of Signs: the Ephemeral Invades the Monumental

Emblems serve a visual metonymic function often embedded in our experience of contemporary life. Before turning to Corregidora and The Pagoda, I will briefly discuss Kara Walker’s A Subtlety: or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an exhibit that took place in the summer of 2014 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. My analysis of the function, appeal, and reception of a historically charged emblematic structure as it appears in the contemporary moment, provides a segue to the dense construction and reappropriation of emblematicity, a process that, permeates the literary texts in this chapter. Walker’s exhibit, was entitled in full:

A Subtlety

Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby

An Homage to the Unpaid and Overworked Artisans Who Have Refined our Sweet Tastes from the Cane Fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the Demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant
It was comprised of a colossal sugar Sphinx in the iconic guise of the Mammy and twelve boy figurines, or attendants, “confected” of sugar and resin. Creative Time, a non-profit organization focusing on public art exhibits, commissioned Walker to create an artwork that would speak to the legacy of sugar in the United States. This work signified a change in oeuvre for Walker, famous for her silhouette installations, drawings, and watercolors. Walker has received both praise and scrutiny for the aesthetic depiction of imagery associated with slavery, with critics disparaging her work as contributing to the growing dehumanization of black life in the national imaginary through her iconic silhouettes.

Walker’s decision to use sugar as raw material for this exhibit was equal parts political statement and playful act. The occasion for the exhibit was the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refinery, whose presence in the area was increasingly becoming an anachronism, given Williamsburg’s booming demographic.\textsuperscript{17} A relic of industrialism, the Refinery was initially built in 1882 and was at the time the largest industrial unit processing sugar on a global scale.\textsuperscript{18}

In her lecture “Sweet Talk”, at the Radcliff Institute in December 2014, Walker reflected on her thoughts on designing the exhibit in the context of exploited black labor in the New World. In awe of the prospective monumentality and size of the project, Walker admitted to have

\textsuperscript{17} Its proximity to Manhattan turned Williamsburg into a haven for younger generations in the New York metropolitan area; however, a gentrification process was soon initiated, causing it to lose its affordable appeal to younger populations and the ethnic clusters that found their home there. A discussion of dispossession in the context of gentrification is not my objective in this segment; however, it is the case that the premise of the exhibit is debunked on its genesis. Demolishing the refinery to make space for high cost residencies is part of the gentrification process that forces low income populations off their residencies due to the increasing cost of life in the area. The premise of the exhibit to honor unpaid labor and to bring to light the conditions of slavery that it instigated and stemmed from, is thus undermined, as it further contributes to the marginalization and dispossession of low income populations.

\textsuperscript{18} The American Sugar Refinery Company, which produced the Domino brand, controlled 98% of sugar refining operations in the States in the 1900s, and received its raw material from the sugar plantations of the South and the Caribbean.
considered “cutting paper again” at first;\(^9\) yet, after extensive research on the history of colonialism and enslavement, she chose to craft a sugar-coated Sphinx, a figure that she found “emblematic of ruin.” The conflation of the two emblems, the Mammy figure and the Sphinx, suggests a genealogical relation for the black diaspora, but also illustrates how Walker’s desire to “conceptually engage with neglect through the visual,” yielded a contemporary emblem for the commemoration of black labor and exploitation in the New World (Walker).

Figure 1 Sphinx with Attendants

The abandoned sugar Refinery, a remnant of industrial modernity, partook in another genealogy, that of capitalism, which began with the slave trade and the establishment of

\(^9\) An allusion to her work with silhouettes.
sugarcane plantations in the South. \(^{20}\) Walker emphasized the prevalence of ruins in her installation, \(^{21}\) as the site of the exhibit and the time sensitive monument she built mirrored the long lost and ephemeral testimonies of the dispossessed black workers whose livelihood and survival depended on their arduous labor on the site of the plantation. A site of protest and lament for the dispossession that her ancestors endured, the exhibit therefore signified to Walker a commemorative project. The concrete story of their hardship lingered in the soft evidence of abundant sugar in the refinery. Using sugar as her primary source, Walker knowingly committed to producing an artifact prone to decay and disintegration. The ephemerality of the monumental Sphinx, the dissipation of her skin, the loss of physical evidence of its existence, are an allusion to the fungible lives and omitted testimonies of those who perished in Southern plantations and those who remained entrapped in predatory labor conditions in the refineries of the North.

\(^{20}\) The contention that the modern and the colonial are not separate, but rather intertwined, temporal and discursive terms rests on the premise that much of what sustained modernity vis-à-vis the New World, has its roots in colonial times.

\(^{21}\) “Ruins, ruins, ruins, is what I kept coming back to.”
In her quest to acknowledge the contribution of her ancestors in the making of the New World, the artist was also “searching for an African American narrative that doesn’t begin in slavery.’’ Her appropriation of the Sphinx however, was not to acknowledge “an egyptophilic relic,’’ as Walker posits, “[but rather to introduce] someone from the New World.”

Walker’s intention was not to monumentalize the iconic Mammy figure along with the stereotypes assigned to it. Instead of perceiving the Sphinx as “an a-sexual care-taker of the city,’’ she sought to reappropriate the Mammy icon and assign to it agency and power: “If I did my work right,’’ Walker noted, “[the Sphinx] gains her power by upsetting expectations” (emphasis mine). In spite of its monumentality, hypervisibility, and nudity, Walker argues that
the Sphinx is withholding; she refuses to be consumed, in spite of her sugar-coated skin, and maintains her composure regardless of her accessibility as a spectacle.22

Reflecting on the correlation of the artwork to its surrounding structures, Walker established that “…the building itself is creating the context and is the sculpture…is the subtlety… [a place that would] complement [the artwork], echo, and hopefully contain its assorted meanings about imperialism, about slavery, about a slave trade that traded sugar for bodies and bodies for sugar.” This “cathedral to commodity,” in Walker’s terms, aimed to signify that “ruins is a byproduct of sugar” (sic); sugar being the substance and subtlety that sustained the social and fiscal conditions for the perpetuation of slavery.

In addition, the unpaid labor, which conditioned the survival of the sugar refining industry, is a focal aspect of the project, as Nato Thompson, Chief Curator of the exhibit suggested: “It is about labor – hence the monumentality—the monumentality is the aftermath of unpaid labor carrying the weight of memory and loss.” Dispossession and the ruinous aftermath of slavery are therefore formative of the project, but as Walker suggests what is more important is a “a historical feeling of connectedness.” By making visible the often invisible, yet arduous, labor produced by enslaved Africans under a predatory capitalist system, Walker reminds us of the systemic discrimination and social inequality black citizens of the United States encounter to this day. Indeed, no indication of how dispossession permeates contemporary societies is more telling than the words of Anne Pasternak, President and Artistic Director of Creative Time, who

22 The use of social media during the exhibit instigated impassioned discussions as visitors depicted themselves with the Sphinx in ways connoting relations or practices that problematize further the public depiction of the artwork. Although some visitors posed in generic ways to record their visit, others gathered for a family picture with the Sphinx looming in the background. This sense of familial belonging to a generation of people affected by the legacy of slavery was contested by the actions of other visitors, whose photographs featured gestures of sexual abuse. The ways in which the exhibit was reproduced in social media is noteworthy taking into account the transience of the actual exhibit and the permanence of the photographic records that emerged from it.
commissioned the exhibit. In the short documentary released by Creative Time, Pasternak posits: “Kara Walker is encouraging us to look at things that are so visible in our society that we wish were invisible…our history to slavery and our contemporary relation to slavery, immigration, migration, mythologizing of black women’s bodies” (emphasis mine). Troublesome as it might be, Pasternak’s statement is indicative of the tendency to silence narratives of trauma and dispossession on the grounds of “closure.” To insinuate that invisibility equals the eradication of these tensions, exacerbates the dispossession of black life and makes redress unattainable. Visibility and exposure, in this case, appear to constitute the sole criteria for the assessment of reality, while desire for their reverse, obscurity and concealment, indicates the perpetuation of a postcolonial fantasy to renounce painful events from our shared historical past.

Instead of silencing the testimonies of black captives, Walker gathers the outcome of their labor, the sugar and the ruin, and builds a colossal Sphinx to commemorate their livelihood and their contribution to the making of the New World. The emblematic structure aims to redeem the invisibility that shrouds them and to make their presence and labor visible. Walker’s Sphinx is a conflation of two iconic structures, which emblematize two oppositional legacies integral to our perception of African American culture; on the one hand, the Mommy Figure evokes stereotypical imagery of black domestic labor in the South, and on the other hand, the Sphinx alludes to an African past prior to enslavement. By enmeshing the two, Walker manages to illustrate how two iconic renderings can unsettle, provoke, and deconstruct the legibility that the Mommy and the Sphinx separately instigate, and in so doing to provide fresh, potentially redemptive associations that counter the legacy of dispossession.
II. Emblematicity and the Malleability of Genre

To explore the interconnection between emblematicity and dispossession, I consider the etymology of the word “emblem,” and its relation to invisibility and disclosure. Stemming from Greek “ἐμβάλλειν,” meaning to “throw in-between” or to “put on,” “ἐμβλῆμα” (emblem) simultaneously suggests a signifying function and a representational breach between what is seen and what is implied. Emblems immediately evoke an entity or concept through vision, and as such their authority and veracity is considered unquestionable. The word’s etymology alludes to its “heraldic” quality; emblems visually announce relations that might not be readily available or visible. As a result, emblematic figures, objects, or constructs encapsulate in visual form a principle, quality, or abstract idea. Emblems are similar in function to symbols, as they present an association between two disparate conceptual entities connected through allegory. Symbols might not always be material, or visual, as the symbol’s situational visualization depends on our imaginative act to conceptualize it. Emblems, on the other hand, have a distinctly visual function, as they work to make an association between the conceptual and the visual evident. It is their materiality, their tactile and palpable quality, that creates a mental imprint of that particular association in their readers’ minds. Instead of connoting a loose relation between a concept and an image, emblems suggest that the two are a single unit of meaning.

At this juncture it is important to emphasize the relation between visibility and violence, and its formative intersection in the concept of dispossession. As suggested in my introduction, dispossession is a multivalent phenomenon which manifests in different iterations across space and time. In spite of its diverse manifestations, dispossession most often emerges through the enactment and imposition of violence. This violence is catalytic to the proliferation of oppressive, hierarchical, and often predatory social schemas, in spite of the fact that it is not
always legible, or visible on the human body. Similarly, dispossession does not merely allude to that which can be taken from us, be it land, rights, cultural capital, or free will, but also encompasses a host of historical occurrences that deprive us of the ability to attain that which we would rightfully enjoy in an egalitarian, non-violent, non-discriminatory setting.\(^{23}\) Dispossession is thus contingent upon chronic forces that often remain unseen, forces whose verbal explication is not readily available, and whose corrosive impact remains obscure to the beholder. Through its power to make visible the ineffable, that which can hardly be put into words, the emblem thus bridges the gap between the conceptual and the visual.

My contention in this chapter is that the process of emblematicity is a process of genre formation and that its reconfiguration constitutes an act of resistance. Emblems present a non-dialectic rendering of a concept due to the immediacy of their reception. The meaning they project is considered unquestionable, poignant, and decisively static. Their intended message is clear to the beholder in spite of the fact that their reception might conform to varied degrees of affinity or resistance. Unlike symbols, which are loosely associated with the concepts they represent, emblems connote an immediate and indubitable relation, an equation of the visual stimulus with the concept it represents.

Perceived as ostensible markers of the real, emblems obscure the multidimensional character of the concepts they represent in the national imaginary, and in so doing proliferate iconic, yet oversimplified versions of it. Notably, the danger of essentialism lurks in the production of icons associated with cultural and ethnic clusters outside of the Anglo-Saxon

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\(^{23}\) A discussion on the markedness of freedom as a referent according to linguistics would be pertinent here, but exceeds the scope of this Chapter. Briefly, if we think of freedom as an unmarked concept, it means that we consider it a foundational human right in any society. However, if freedom is the marked referent in the freedom/unfreedom binary, then the implication is that freedom is not a given. This relation is oftentimes subverted in the social strata of colonial and postcolonial societies, as those are oftentimes build on varied degrees of freedom and unfreedom in the New World, as theorists such as Laura Doyle and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon have illustrated.
mainstream, such as African American and Asian American populations. Women of color, in particular, are more susceptible to misrepresentation than their male counterparts, as they suffer from interlocking forms of social disenfranchisement. The proliferation of such imagery, which diminishes their identity in oversimplified visual renderings, consistently engulfs them in conditions of precariousness, which prove detrimental for their social wellbeing. Such iconic imagery carries a long history of containment. The Mammy figure, Venus Hottentot, Jezebel, as well as more contemporary takes on stereotypical black female representations, such as that of the welfare queen, haunt the national imaginary and perpetuate disparaging stereotypes by which women of color are identified. This iconicity is often associated with claims of authenticity, which do not enable empowerment but rather reduce women of color to essentialist stereotypes.

While I do not mean to suggest that iconicity and emblematicity are identical processes, the representational practices they foster are mutually constitutive. As Nicole Fleetwood argues in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*, iconicity is the sum of “the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes” (2). Subjects whose usurped imagery is rendered iconic or emblematic oscillate between the hypervisibility of iconicity and their effacement, as the visual dominance they “enjoy” is starkly juxtaposed to their lack of analytical depth; in other words they are so often reiterated that they lose all meaning other than their face value. Iconicity and emblematicity therefore result in what Franz Fanon has theorized as a forced “epidermalization of inferiority” (11). I find this concept particularly generative as the epidermis, the surface, the locus upon which the icon’s meaning is inscribed is what reflects the projected meanings that the icon ostensibly stands for. Theorists, such as Fleetwood and Lauren Berlant have argued that the audience’s response to the affective pull of the icon signifies a “collective attachment” procured
by the effortless categorization that the icon reproduces for us. In the case of black iconic imagery, the categorization happens along the axis of race and the assorted stereotypes that abide by racist discourse. As Fleetwood argues, “…in the focus on the singularity of the image, the complexity of black lived experience and discourses of race are effaced. The image functions as an abstraction, a decontextualized evidence of a historical narrative that is constrained by normative public discourse” (10). I am a bit wary of Fleetwood’s characterization of the image as abstract, since the icon she references in this case comes with concrete conceptual ties deeply entrenched in colonial discourses of power. For instance, in the previous segment, the Mammy figure is not an abstraction at all. The incessant repetition of the image has created a tie between subservience and the Mammy Figure, concretizing the icon and effacing the complex history of racial subjugation. As a result, the perils of iconicity—which are in turn enabled through emblematization—is, as Wahneema Lubiano argues, that “iconography and fetishization are no consistent substitute for history” (10). Resisting the impetus to abide by stereotypical and iconic renderings of non-white womanhood, the protagonists of Corregidora and The Pagoda seek to be liberated from the rigid confines of this “epidermalization” imposed upon them (Fanon 11). Jones and Powell resort to the visual to redress this victimizing dynamic and to reappropriate its mechanics of production. In an effort to relay dispossession through a visual lens, they reclaim visuality as an emancipatory means, and in so doing, manage to articulate their resistance through it. In Troubling Vision, Fleetwood wonders what happens “when black female[s]…take up the dominant representation of black women in visual culture and public discourse to construct new modes of operations” (105). It is in response to that question that I explore what happens when women of color appropriate the visual genres of their subjugation to procure alternate accounts of their experiences, based on the reclamation of their bodies and their
surroundings. I argue that the protagonists in Corregidora and The Pagoda striving to make the violent underpinnings of their dispossessed state visible through the use of reconfigured emblematic structures, in order to escape a life “sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 109).

In the next segment, I discuss Jones’ Corregidora and explore the ways in which jazz performance becomes a sensory archive of slavery’s silenced testimonies. In so doing, I am also exploring Ursa’s stage avatar, the jazz performer who infuses her art with life narrative in an effort to recontextualize her familial and personal history from the coffee plantations of Brazil to the jazz clubs of Kentucky.


“I ‘ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes, when it’s time to give witness … I’ll stain their hands.”

-Gayl Jones, Corregidora

In Corregidora, dispossession is intertwined with kinlessness and sexual exploitation. Ursa Corregidora, a jazz performer, grows up in a household consisting solely of women, haunted by the specter of Corregidora, the Portuguese slave owner that fathered both her grandmother and mother. Ursa hears of her ancestors’ trauma under slavery in Brazil and is asked to ensure that their testimonies will not be forgotten by “making generations.” Reluctant as she might be to partake in this painful process, Ursa contests their narrative as a child and distances herself from the violence and exploitation that circumscribes their lives. However, she is soon to realize that violence and abuse permeate her life and the social fabric of the community that surrounds her.
The novel opens with a dramatic fall, a symbolism for the brutal rupture brought on by domestic violence. Ursa suffers a miscarriage that leads to a hysterectomy when she is pushed down the stairs by her husband Mutt, a moment that radically reconfigures her life. The trauma of partaking in the vicious circle of cross-generational violence, which she previously doubted being part of, is further exacerbated as she becomes aware of her inability to contribute to the perpetuation of “generations.” This loss signifies a moment of rootlessness for Ursa as her inability to procreate compromises the survival of her ancestors’ testimonies. As a childless woman and the bearer of tremendous historical responsibility, Ursa now seeks alternative ways to contextualize her life and theirs.

Deprived of her reproductive abilities, Ursa contemplates the nature of evidence that her ancestors left behind:

My great-grandmama told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget. (9)

The paratactic structure of the first sentence, lacking punctuation, leaving the reader out of breath, signifies the urgency inherent in the testimony to be passed on; but it also connotes its ongoing function, the ceaseless reiteration of the narrative from one generation to the next, in order to prevent the erasure of testimony. Since “they’d burned everything to play like it didn’t ever happen,” (9) Ursa is educated from early on that her responsibility is to procreate, so as to ensure the survival of their narrative: “The important thing is making generations,” she is reminded, “they can burn out the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that’s what makes the verdict” (22). Ursa seeks her own way to
contribute to this shifting topography of emblematizing loss. Embedded in this discourse due to her status as daughter and her potential as incubus, she feels disempowered when she loses her uterus. If the genealogy of women she partakes in emblematizes the dispossession and abuse of black femininity on the site of the plantation, Ursa needs to create an alternate emblem of the historicity she embodies. In one of her most memorable encounters with the gruesome stories her Great Gram shared, Ursa recalls being slapped across the face when she contested the narrative offered: “‘You telling the truth, Great Gram? She slapped me. When I am telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying … I am leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too…” (14). What is at stake is here is the ephemerality of the evidence that the Corregidora women are able to produce. The anger that Ursa triggers as a child illustrates Great Gram’s unsettlement with the ways in which her life was inscribed and subsequently erased from historical accounts in post-emancipation Brazil. The evidence that she is able to procure, unlike that offered by the bureaucratic colonial apparatus, is ephemeral, unofficial, often intangible, but then again beyond one’s reach. Her body, the body of her daughter and granddaughter, the product of her labor, be it coffee grounds or enduring sexual violation, are the means through which she counters the official state narratives, and as such become her own contribution to the collective history of the American continent.

In the book, the monumental impact of Great Gram’s narrative is structured upon a conflation of the verbal and the haptic. As Great Gram was narrating her story, Ursa recalls:

Her hands had lines all over them. It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger. Once when she was talking she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself and held my waist again. (11)
In the passage words appear to have generative and therapeutic potential for Great Gram. The incessant repetition of her experiences in verbal form, a concept compliant with Freud’s definition of trauma, enables her memory and triggers her anger. However, it is the function of her touch that is noteworthy, an allegorical schema for the perpetuation of violence; as Ursa’s body is exposed to her touch, it becomes evident that even she is not safe from the grip of slavery. In addition to that, Great Gram resorts to the visual to ground her hatred for Corregidora, specifically a photograph that she later bestows to Ursa: “I’ve got a photograph of him. One Great Gram smuggled out I guess, so we’d know who to hate,” Ursa tells Mutt (10).

Corregidora’s photograph becomes an icon of pure evil in the eyes of Great Gram as she explains: “I stole it because I said whenever afterward when evil come, I wanted something to point to and say ‘that’s what evil look like’” (12). His picture, however, does not suffice for her testimony to survive, as it does not offer substantial evidence of his deeds. In spite of the visual content that it provides, knowing “what devil look like,” the picture is unable to confer the emotive backbone of Great Gram’s repulsion towards him, or to reveal the abuse she endured in his hands. The evidence that she leaves Ursa to reckon with is tangible, but static; poignant, yet inconclusive. The iconic image of Corregidora crystallizes colonial abuse and sexual exploitation in the eyes of Great Gram, and maybe empowers her in that she possesses the representational means through which he becomes known to her community—nothing more than the photograph—but in the course of history, her evidence is ephemeral, unsubstantiated, and her testimony is void.

In her quest to locate an affective sphere that would articulate the trauma that embalms her, Ursa finally resorts to jazz: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new
world” (59). Like Walker’s conflation of two icons in an emblem of unsettlement, the sugar-coated Sphinx, Ursa’s “New World Song,” relays the trauma of slavery and its colonial origins. The switch from “Portuguese” to the “New World” appellation draws the readers’ attention to the aftermath of slavery, the formation of a post-slavery black subject, and it indicates a process of exploitation that started in the Middle Passage and culminated in the plantation economies of the South. Given its historical origins in plantation chants that aimed to entertain and diffuse the despair of enslaved workers, jazz articulates the pleasure and pain inherent in New World experience. But more importantly jazz becomes enmeshed in the labor, ephemeral in its improvisatory quality, and its erratic cadence, produced side by side with coffee grounds in pre-emancipation plantation sites, yet still lingering in the vexed terrains of post-emancipation United States. Ursa’s mother warns her, “songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you are singing,” but Ursa knows that it is through this painful performance that her testimony, and *their* testimony, will survive (53). Ursa therefore embraces the icon of the female jazz performer and in so doing seeks to undermine its overly sexualized façade, to bring forth the historical responsibility of bearing witness and producing an alternative commemorative genre. Her performance both aural and visual, enables her to claim ownership over an artistic practice rooted deeply in the contested history of enslavement across the American continent.

Moreover, through her performance Ursa is able to traverse the space between pleasure and pain, intimacy and estrangement, desire and hatred; qualities reflected in jazz lyrics. This figurative space reflects the realities of her relationship to her former husband Mutt, but also becomes a metaphor for the physical locus of the plantation, where such monstrous exchanges of intimacy often took place. “They call it the devil blues… I bit my lip singing…it was as if I wanted them to see what he’d done, hear it,” she notes, drawing attention to the function of the
song to bear witness to violence. Ursa is at once aware of the harm she is imposing on herself in order to communicate the affective impact of Mutt’s violence; but she is also aware that part of her familial history is embedded in the same discourse, the oscillation between pain and pleasure: “All those blues feelings ... what do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain?” upon realizing that Gram overstayed the emancipation in Corregidora’s plantation (50). This is a question central to her thinking process and integral to her performance, which finally results in an epiphany that enables Ursa to comprehend her familial history through her intimate relationship to Mutt.

Ursa turns her history into a performance, informed by the conditions of violence that cost her the loss of her reproductive abilities, and subsequently of an heir to the legacy of dispossession. This performance enables her to embody a post-slavery subject whose identity is informed both by its genealogy and, ironically, by its inability to produce offspring. Instead, her performance becomes a sight of emancipation, emblematizing Ursa’s generative encounter with the archive of dispossession. As Ann Cvetkovitz writes in *An Archive of Feelings*:

> trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on the conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration and new forms of monuments, rituals and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. (7)

Ursa’s jazz performance is ephemeral by definition, as each iteration is finite, continuously reconstructed, and improvisatory. However, the emblematicity of her performance, the resonance of the black female body singing the blues, acquires monumental impact. By aligning herself and her history with the blues, Ursa manages to bear witness, regardless of the fact that she is unable
to produce offspring. Her performance, a conflation of the visual and the aural, connects the past and the present and continues to inform the archive of dispossession with a narrative of her own making. This narrative is not contributed in textual form, but rather through Ursa’s embodied presence, which instigates an affective engagement with the story.

More than reclaiming ownership over her body, Ursa achieves through the spectacle of her performance a powerful reinscription of the visual tropes that contain black femininity in iconic representations. Jones directs our attention to visuality from the opening segment of the novel. Although the vividness of the narration relies heavily on the orality that multiple “I said,” “he said” pairings evoke, it is clear that Ursa is aware of herself as spectacle, devoured by the eyes of the audience. Mutt is equally aware that Ursa is exposed to multiple ocular exchanges as a body in performance, a fact that infuriates him and subsequently triggers his violent behavior. According to Mutt the audience, predominantly male, “mess[es] with they eyes,” and Ursa through her participation in the performance enables them to do so (3). Mutt exercises his patriarchal entitlement to stop Ursa from performing. “You one of them,” he tells her, referring to her Gram and Greatgram, the Corregidora women. “If you wasn’t one of them you wouldn’t like them mens watching after you” (154). The appropriation of the seduction narrative, often employed in narratives of female bondage, implies the desire of the abused subject and suggests that she is complicit in her own subjugation. Here Mutt articulates his own ownership over Ursa’s body in an attempt to contain her and prevent her from performing, but more importantly he unwittingly illustrates his enmeshment in the legacy of enslavement; for in his final enactment of spousal entitlement Mutt performs his anger in a theatrical maneuver that evokes the auction block:
“That’s what I’m gon do,” he said. He was standing with his arms all up in the air. I was on my way to work. “One a y’all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale. That’s what y’all wont, ain’t it? Piece a ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it?” (159)

Steadfast in her commitment to perform, Ursa dismisses his behavior, which finally results to her fall and hysterectomy. Ironically, in his effort to silence Ursa, Mutt enabled her to release the emancipatory potential of her performance and to utilize her embodied presence as a means to bear witness to the atrocities of the past through jazz.

Well-versed in the functions of the visual, Ursa later relies on it for her survival. In a text replete with verbs indicating verbal articulation (“I said,” “he said,” “I sang,” “I was singing”) there is a sudden turn to the visual as Ursa senses danger and moves closer to disclosing to the audience the most catalytic event of her life: “I could see Mutt peeking in, looking drunk and evil [and] then I didn’t see him…” (3). This switch in modality indicates a break in the temporal continuum of the novel as the events accelerate towards the fall, Ursa’s defining moment.

After the fall the connection with the visual is reinstated, when Ursa is addressed with her name for the first time. When Tadpole, her soon-to-be partner visits to inquire about her health, he calls Ursa with her initials “U.C.”. Jones directs our attention to the importance of this moment by prefacing the segment with a story about how Tadpole acquired his name. Therefore, when he calls Ursa “U.C” the reader is more attuned to the underlying meaning that “U.C.” as an appellation might connote. Based on its aural qualities U.C, or “you see,” assigns Ursa a perceptive quality and obscures Corregidora’s legacy, as his name is effaced. This perception is arguably associated with her renewed understanding of her family’s history and the legacy of enslavement, which she thought she had already escaped. Her actual name, Ursa is also effaced.
Latin for “bear,” her name signifies a potent visual stimulus, but its effacement in this first utterance indicates the fact that she can no longer bear a child, through the homonymic association with its etymology. In English the homophone verb “bear” indicates the burden that Ursa cannot longer carry as a result of the intergenerational violence she is exposed to (a child), but it also signifies her responsibility to bear witness, so that her family history will not be erased by official historical accounts.

The ocular performs several functions in the text, being a catalyst for introspection, as well as enabling human contact. Looking at the stiches of her abdomen is a moment of self-awareness for Ursa, as she begins to fathom that recovering from the fall will be easier than recovering from its aftermath. Violence leaves its mark on her, and she initially begins to see herself as an embodied void in terms of procreation and “making generations.” Similarly, “watching” is a means for Ursa and Tadpole to build intimacy: “when he came back, he stood watching me. I was frowning, but I didn’t tell him to stop. When I finished, I handed him the glass. He took it back and came back and watched me again” (7). Due to her status as a spectacle, his watching is both within and outside of bounds, as well as a means of negotiating their relationship to one another. Her spectacle is public, yet his ability to look at her wounded body in private becomes a market of intimacy. However, the fact that Tadpole owns the café where she sings imbues their relationship with elements of ownership, property and market value. Tadpole’s “way of looking without looking” so that he could take care of her implies to Ursa that he is an affectionate and potentially kind partner; yet, the fact that these ocular exchanges happen within the grounds of his property, which also contains the stage that she sings at, problematizes the articulation of her free will and the exercise of her agency (17).
Spectacle and hot commodity but in her own terms, Ursa’s performance is her contribution to the archive of enslavement, the means through which she bears witness to her familial legacy. Similar to Walker’s use of sugar, Ursa uses her corporeality and her singing, the product of her labor, as a means to emblematize the survival of her ancestors against the victimization they faced as black women. While recuperating from the hysterectomy, Ursa dreams that she is discussing her inability to procreate with her mother: “Then let me give witness the only way I can. I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes, when it’s time to give witness, I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I’ll stain their hands,” she offers (54). This statement is not a mere acknowledgement that she cannot contribute via “making generations,” but it also implies that she is aware of the fiscal dynamics that underlie narratives of slavery and domination in the New World. In the same way that Walker reappropriates sugar as a staple of capitalism to commemorate the lives of those lost on the site of the plantation, Jones resorts to coffee, a staple of the Brazilian plantation economies to leave evidence of her testimony. The act of putting the grounds of coffee into her eyes, which would mean the loss of her vision, juxtaposed to the vivid image of the others’ “stained hands” suggest the deliverance of historical responsibility at all cost. In the same way, Ursa’s jazz performance might be an endangering practice for her, since her sight becomes an occasion for the enactment of desire; however, its historical significance transforms the performance into an emblem of collective perseverance throughout slavery. Her corporeality and performance serve as visual reminders of the pain incurred during slavery, while her voice reclaims the black subject’s agency within the archive. Ursa seeks to reappropriate the emblematicity of her performance, and to switch its emphasis from the overt sexualization of the performer, to the creation of historical evidence. In so doing she claims ownership of her emblematic performance; turning
her image into the emblem of a shared historicity rather than the icon of an appropriated body “sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 109).

IV. Passing through the New World: The Pagoda

In Corregidora, Jones performs a spatiotemporal weaving, fusing present and past, colonial Brazil and the United States. Instead, in The Pagoda Patricia Powell immerses her readers in the space of the Caribbean and constructs a linear narrative, in which memory emerges in the form of vignettes rather than through narrative rupture. The Pagoda recounts the story of Mr. Lowe, a small shop owner in Jamaica. Several other characters are prominently featured in the narrative, including his wife Miss Sylvie, the housekeeper Dulche, and her son Omar. It is however the figure of Cecil, Lowe’s “benefactor” and captor, which haunts the narrative and mobilizes its culmination to disclose Lowe’s identity. Using Lowe’s letter to his daughter as a structural and thematic bookend, the story is more prevalently a narrative about the clash between official historical accounts and personal narrative as they intertwine in spaces that instigate varied degrees of vulnerability.

Moreover, the novel addresses the sense of homelessness that Lowe feels in the West Indies and his effort to redress it by building a cultural center in the form of a Pagoda. As Homi Bhabha detected in “The Home and the World,” in The Pagoda as in much of contemporary fiction one can hear “the deep stirring of the unhomely.” Bhabha connected the elusive notion of the unhomely with Freud’s notion of the uncanny (unheimlich), and with the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private, estrangement and intimacy, belonging and excision. Notably, Bhabha situated the unhomely in the legacy of colonialism and enslavement
and argued, that “in the stirrings of the unhomely another world becomes visible.” Drawing from Bhabha’s observation, I am examining how these worlds become visible through the Pagoda, an emblem that simultaneously serves and contests resistant imaginaries of homelessness and belonging in the course of the novel. In so doing, I am following Lowe’s trajectory in reimagining the landscape of intimacy and freedom on the island after the recuperation of his silenced testimony, and his subsequent emancipatory effort to shake off the emblematic structures that contain him.

In the beginning of the novel and as the day commences in the West Indies, Lowe starts writing to his estranged daughter, informing her of a family secret that needs to be disclosed. “It does not make sense to put this aside and hope it will go away,” Lowe writes. “It makes sense simply to say it now. To tell you myself before someone else does. I know you will probably find all of this hard to believe, but at some time or other we all do things to save our lives. Some more drastic than usual” (7). His letter encloses his life into a narrative of hardship and precariousness, and prefaces the readers’ encounter with Lowe’s humble beginnings in rural China. However, the truth of his identity remains undisclosed. Lowe, uncertain that his daughter will believe his narrative, makes known to her in advance that “there isn’t a record of any of this. Of what I am in truth. There are no certificates. No registration. Everything had to be quick and hush hush. Nothing was written down” (8). More than his desire for self-revelation, at stake here is Lowe’s posthumous legacy, which he cannot possibly substantiate with ephemeral clues. His impetus in writing the letter is similar to that of Ursa’s female progenitors, but more than providing a truthful counter-narrative of his life in passing, Lowe’s urgent task is fueled by the growing animosity against Asians on the island: “Sometimes the voices lulled, but this week they had rioted his dreams, commanded that he signify, give testimony, and so now here he was. Here he
was” (9). His fears of imminent violence are well founded. Bearing witness is spurred not only by his desire to claim his space in history, but also within the space of Jamaica. Specifically, Lowe seeks to leave an account of his life in the West Indies on the historical archive, and in so doing to construct a narrative authored by himself alone.

His self-revealing maneuver will have to wait however, as soon after Lowe starts writing, an unexpected visitor announces that his shop is burning to the ground. Overwhelmed with fear for his shop, his only legacy, and Cecil’s life, as he frequently sleeps at the shop, Lowe rushes to see if there is anything salvageable from the disaster. Upon his arrival, a disoriented and profoundly shaken Lowe, realizes that the shop is burnt to the ground and that Cecil, his captor and “benefactor,” is now dead.

Shortly after Lowe begins authoring his testimony of dispossession, Cecil’s death in a suspected act of arson becomes the catalyst for Lowe’s emancipation in the context of the narrative. The story thus begins to unravel in the midst of the ashes and clamor surrounding the burnt site of Lowe’s livelihood. With Cecil gone, and the material constraints of his life annihilated Lowe begins to “unclothe” his life narrative. Born Lau A-yin, the daughter of a poor family in rural China, Lowe spent his entire life passing as male after Cecil captured and raped him onboard a ship from China to the West Indies. After his capture and upon reaching Jamaica, Lau realized she was pregnant and after the baby was delivered started passing in order to protect herself and his daughter in the extensive periods of time that Cecil would be on his mongering expeditions. Soon a wife was procured for him to complete the façade of family life; a life which Lowe, now, refers to as a masquerade. Having spent his entire life in the guise of an Asian man, Lowe still needs to keep up his performance after Cecil’s death as his position renders him as vulnerable as he ever was in the shifting social topography of the Caribbean.
The origins of Lowe’s adventure speak to his victimized status in a predatory economy of labor. Lowe had sneaked into Cecil’s boat voluntarily, trying to escape an arranged marriage, not knowing the reality of the slave trade, which did not end with abolition in the New World. Having involuntarily imperiled himself due to his lack of knowledge, Lowe’s coming of age appears concomitant with the realization of gendered violence and exploited labor:

He didn’t know that the ship was full up of stolen Chinese. That these thin men spare as bones were piled in like prisoners and stowed tight with the chests of tea and silk, for sale to the highest bidder…He didn’t know then that that was common accord, that not long before, the Negro people had met a similar fate and that now it was big business again, for the sugar estates were there devastated, broken down in financial ruin…he didn't know that Cecil, who had a little ship and some capital, could disregard the contract system where they’d have to dole out money per head at immigration for each Chinese, and could instead pay little or nothing to men desperate for food and work, to kidnap anyone that they could find. It was only later that he found out. Long after Cecil found him hiding in the bowels of the ship, flattened alongside planks, roasting from fever. Long after Cecil kept him locked up in his small hot dark cabin. (17)

Having found himself in new surroundings, Lowe had to be able to claim his position in a mutable social sphere. Navigating the historical circumstances of the era meant that Lowe would have to come to terms with the shifting positionality of Asians in the West Indies.

Lowe’s situation in Jamaica was the outcome of the shifting social stratification patterns that emerged post-emancipation in the American continent and the Caribbean. Lisa Lowe argues that the end of slavery in America was not the aftermath of the abolitionist movement, or the liberal ideology it espoused. Rather, the newly attained emancipation indicated a calculated move away from black labor, which was becoming increasingly difficult to manage, and towards an alternative system, which privileged varied degrees of freedom and containment based on the division of labor. Reflecting on his own experiences in Jamaica, Mr. Lowe points out in the
novel that “emancipation had come. Nobody was working for nothing anymore. And so the planters to save face, had now turned their gaze east looking for the cheapest labor they could find” (17). Indeed as Lisa Lowe emphasizes,

a reading of the colonial archive regarding the British plan to import Chinese labor permits us to view the British decision to end the slave trade in 1807, and slavery in its empire in 1834, as equally utilitarian decisions, pragmatic attempts indent to stave off potential black revolution on the one hand, and to resolve difficulties in the sugar economy resulting from the relative ‘rigidity’ of slave labor within colonial merchantilism in the other. (100)

This plan, titled the Trinidad experiment, viewed Chinese people as a pool of labor that could be exploited in the aftermath of emancipation; one that could also offer to the newly emancipated blacks the false hope of social mobility in a rigidly stratified, immutable social schema. The premise of the Trinidad experiment was therefore twofold: under its rubric blacks would not only be emancipated, but also appeased by the fabrication of a subpar social stratum that would assign an ostensible sense of upward mobility. As Lisa Lowe points out, “the ‘coole’ solution was a colonial trope for a new economic liberalism that would no longer depend upon slavery, but would incorporate various laboring groups racially differentiated in a hierarchy that ranged from ‘free’ to ‘unfree’” (99). In so doing, the presentation of indentured labor “as ‘freely’ contracted served to buttress liberal promises of freedom for former slaves, while enabling planters to profit” from the labor relations that emerged in the periphery of this process of modernization (Lowe 100). Instead of the positive results that the colonizers were anticipating in terms of profit, the shifting stratification of social cache exacerbated the relations between disparate populations in the West Indies.

The loss of Cecil becomes a locus of intense confusion and uncertainty for Mr. Lowe. His disorientation is palpably evident, in his depictions of life as “spinning and spinning and
spinning away with no bottom at all under his feet and no rails against which to clutch or lean up, no compass to steer, no supervision, no bolts or bars” (17). Left on his own devices, Lowe now needs to discover the world afresh. As Cecil’s dead body rests against the trunk of a tree, Lowe looks around to develop a sense of the world that is not permeated by Cecil’s firm dictates.

The sight of his shop burnt to the ground shakes Mr. Lowe to the core. He realizes that he is unwanted, that the venom of the people around him is substantial to instigate a criminal act against him. He feels unsafe; and yet, in this temporal conjunction when everything is rapidly deteriorating, Mr. Lowe at first unwittingly, commences his path to emancipation. This brutal displacement, the violent excision from the social and fiscal fabric of the society that surrounds him, awakens Mr. Lowe’s awareness of himself as a participant in the ever-evolving colonial economy of space and bodies, opening up new possibilities for expression. This awareness evokes Fanon’s concepts of the “historio-racial schema” and the “bodily or corporeal schema,” which he defines as “the ideologies and forces of racism that imprison one’s body” and the “composition of the self as a body in the middle of the spatial and temporal world” respectively (Fanon qtd in McKittrick 25). As a result, Mr. Lowe’s dispossession carries liberating potential, as he is freed on the one hand from the confines of his assumed identity, and on the other from his vocational role in the labor economy of the West Indies. In this way he is able to renegotiate his relation to the space of the Caribbean and to seek redress for the violence and injustice that was inflicted upon him. Instead of rebuilding the shop, he therefore decides to build a Pagoda, a space that reverberates with childhood memories, and one that would commemorate the legacy of his people on the island.

The desire to build the Pagoda, as Dana Luciano suggests in her discussion of monumentality in *Arranging Grief*, gestures towards “a spatiotemporal expansiveness,” which
curiously does not intend to bring “home” closer to the Caribbean, but rather to signify the ongoing labor that people of Chinese descent have contributed to Jamaica, their current rightful home (173). Mr. Lowe aims to construct a monument that does not stand for his allegiance to a faraway homeland, or to a nostalgic relic of the past, but rather for his conviction that this homeland, needs to become less unhomely and more inclusive to the people that served it with their labor and livelihood. Indeed, as Russ Castronovo argues, “the inclination to monumentalism developed as a way to address the need for historical memory in the search for a [common] identity” (qtd in Luciano 173). By appropriating the image of the Pagoda, Mr. Lowe aims to emblematize the legitimization of Asian identity and its equal standing among other cultural and ethnic identities on the island. The Pagoda, an emblem of his labor and physical presence in Jamaica, is thus meant to “settle” its geographical terrain, while also “settling” Mr. Lowe’s unsettlement for the unhomely grounds that he traverses.

However, as the novel progresses Mr. Lowe is lured by more urgent projects that interfere with completing his plan. The Pagoda eventually remains unfinished, quite fittingly if one considers Mumford’s declaration in The Culture of Cities that “the monument is aligned with “death and fixity,” whereas the modern world, in contrast, is ‘oriented to the cycle of life’” (qtd in Luciano 180). Mr. Lowe instead focuses on confronting his painful past, dismantling his sartorial guise, and resolving the “masquerade” of a marriage he still maintained to Miss Sylvie. Performing several gender roles within a continuum of available positions, Lowe eventually comes to terms with his gender passing, Miss Sylvie’s racial passing, their fraught relationship and his sartorial fashioning into a man. As he closes the novel, and having veered from one appellation to the other, between Mr. Lowe and A-yin, the protagonist writes to her daughter as a woman, disclosing her full story and fantasizing about her daughter visiting her place of birth:
Ask anybody, I been writing you this letter for years. But maybe the shop had to burn down first, maybe Cecil had to die first, maybe Dulcie had to leave and Miss Sylvie, maybe I had to lose every damn thing first and fall down so low and so deep that I almost hit bottom before I could finish writing it finally. Maybe it was just time to reach out to you in this sort of way. Not last week, not next year, but now. And exactly with the words put so. (245)

The catalytic impact of the dispossession A-yin experienced is evident in this segment, as it created the conditions for the emergence of a testimony untethered to the confining social schemas that oppressed her. Her fascination with the image of the Pagoda as emblematic of her inclusion and legacy in the New World, paved the way for her final confrontation with all shrouds, veils, and epidermises that confined, restrained, and defined her. By actively unsettling their carefully constructed scaffolding on her body and psyche, A-yin closes the novel at home, writing her testimony on her desk, confined within the boundaries of her domestic surroundings, but freed from the tyranny of gender roles and the material or rhetorical cladding that determined her identity.

To conclude, in my analysis of *A Subtlety, Corregidora* and *The Pagoda*, I showed the intimate connections between monumentality, decoloniality and emblematicity. Walker, Jones, and Powell engage in an affective undoing of emblematic structures that historically perpetuate hierarchical colonial orderings, and in so doing enable an emancipatory counter-archive of lived experience to emerge, one that offers new emblems that rewire our perception of race. To do so they utilize affect, as a visceral, pre-cognitive response mechanism, and trigger a rewiring of our engagement with the historical archive outside and beyond the stipulations of colonial discourse. By repurposing emblematicity they engage in an act of resistance against the systematic
misrepresentation and rigid categorization of the colonial archive. Walker, Jones, and Powell, call for an usurpation of the modes of cultural production and propose a decolonial practice that enables the construction of an alternative polyphonic archive that unsettles the hierarchical ordering of race relations.
Chapter Three

Geographies of Blackness, Immigration, and Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

*We are born and have our being in a place of memory.*

*We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic.*

*We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering.*

- Belonging: a Culture of Place, bell hooks

Nostalgia, the longing for one’s past, permeates immigrant narratives. It manifests in the descriptions of the homeland, in the minutiae of lived experience, and in the intimate connections that the characters make to their past. An imminent sense of return is imbricated in the term. Etymologically, nostalgia means aching to return to the physical terrains of the homeland. As a result, a delicate equilibrium is omnipresent in tales of immigration, for nostalgia is met with the desire to persevere, to immerse oneself in a terrain unlike the homely, and to achieve one’s inclusion in a space of former unbelonging.

Published in 2013, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* narrates the immigrant stories of Nigerian citizens in the United States and Britain, and in so doing brings to life the grave dispossessions and frequent microaggressions that they encounter in their search for a new home. The story revolves around the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze and traces their coming of age in their native Nigeria and the ultimate resolution of their relationship as a result of immigration.

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24 From Ancient Greek νόστος (return) and ἀλγός (ache).
stipulations. The world of Americanah is also populated by a number of peripheral characters, who contribute their immigrant stories and weave a tapestry of interlocking narratives. These stories serve as an archive of immigrant experience, a repository of didactic moments for those back home tempted to immigrate, and as a testament to the representational anguish that immigrants face upon arrival.

The transcontinental movement of Nigerian immigrants occurs in tandem with their enmeshment in black identity, a process catalyzed by the hegemonic mythmaking of Britain and the United States. Ifemelu, a transplant in a university setting in the United States, is confronted with this newly ascribed blackness, a concept that she feels at odds with. Before her arrival to the United States she is either Nigerian or African, since blackness is not an available representational category in a Nigerian cultural context. The socially and politically charged appellation of blackness is threatening to Ifemelu, who feels her African heritage erased under the representational pressures of US racial categorization. In her blog titled “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negros) by a Non-American Black” she writes, “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t black in your country? You’re in America now” (273).

Reflecting on their first encounter with the colonial metropole, critics of postcolonialism have expressed similar sentiments. Born in Jamaica in the 1930s, Stuart Hall admits to reflecting on his blackness only upon arriving in Oxford in the 1950s. Black identity, forced along with its associated meanings, conditions the interactions that take place in the African immigrants’ new surroundings. In the rest of her blog post, titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In

25 Helpful texts to explore the ramifications of empire on personal identity and intellectual thought are Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands (2017) by Stuart Hall, and “Lost (and Found?) in Translation” (2009) by Hazel Carby originally published in Small Axe.
America You Are Black, Baby,” Ifemelu lists the misaligned American beliefs projected upon African immigrants due to their phenotypical similarity to African Americans, a category already fixed in the white hegemonic imaginary. Ifemelu expresses her confusion when she is expected to act a certain way upon encountering culture-specific references intended as backhanded racist slurs, she shows her indignation when she is stereotyped based on her blackness, and explains how she is conscious now about navigating spaces in which her body might be hypervisible and charged with suspicion. Finally she concludes, that in order for a black immigrant to maintain her good standing in a society imbricated in legacies of racial subjugation, one’s careful engagement with economies of affect is critical:

If you are telling a non black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, don’t be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don’t even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that might have happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion. (275)

A few moments in this passage are of particular interest to me, starting with the use of irony, which foregrounds the strategic distribution of affect in discussions of black immigrant experience. Complacency, propriety, and an almost frivolous positivity towards life are expected of the black immigrant subject in order for the non-black American citizen to engage in the conversation without feeling overwhelmed, Ifemelu sardonically posits. Negotiating with emotions such as bitterness and anger fueled by injustice and discrimination has to take place in a palatable manner so that the non black interlocutor would not feel threatened.
In this chapter, I examine how a Du Boisian sense of double-consciousness emerges in the United States when blackness becomes an enforced identity for African immigrants. In the novel, Ifemelu’s body, along with the bodies of other African immigrants away from home, are subjected to practices of surveillance that monitor and delimit their lives. This double consciousness is a new form of colonialism that is enforced upon the protagonists due to their diasporic status. The dispossessions they endure take the form of labor exploitation, societal marginalization, financial vulnerability—which in turn propel their engagement in unlawful acts—and finally a curtailed citizenship status that undermines their survival. In order to undo the rigid categorization and constant surveillance that is imposed upon them, I argue that they engage in acts of resistance inspired by forms of sousveillance. The practice of sousveillance, which I am elaborating on in the next segment, is exercised through the attentive witnessing and recording of race relations in the United States both in the narrative and through Ifemelu’s blog, which affords her a prestigious postdoctoral position at Princeton, as an observer of U.S. American culture. These embodied and narrative performances of noncompliance create an alternative archive of the present realized in the form of the book as well as in its content. This opposition to historical oppression against blackness allows Ifemelu to claim her identity outside of the confines of the white hegemonic imaginary and unsettles the exceptional immigrant narrative, which often works in divisive ways for diasporic communities. It also challenges the forms in which sympathy as projected by others, predominantly white Americans, reinforces hierarchical divisions of race. In the same segment, I turn to portraiture by Toyin Ojih Odutola, a first generation Nigerian American visual artist, to look into the ways she unsettles the discourse of race through the playful manipulation of epidermises in her work. In the following segments, I examine how Ifemelu manages to counter the cultural projections enforced upon her by
reversing the function of surveillance through the practice of sousveillance, and then illustrate through an analysis of the politics of respectability how the gaze constructs social relations in the public sphere. I discuss how Ifemelu engages with the politics of respectability in Nigeria and the United States, and show how her intimate connections and her immigration trajectory in the U.S. construct a powerful allegory, that allows the reader to trace the development of her journey and cultural identity.

**Surveillance, Sousveillance, and Double Consciousness**

In their new diasporic home, Adichie’s protagonists engage in elaborate practices to understand the cultural terrains that surround them. In *Americanah*, similar to Adichie’s earlier works, a Du Boisian sense of double consciousness is prominently featured in the ways in which African immigrants confront their newly ascribed black identity. The liminal position of the diasporic subject is the result of new and old national and postcolonial sensibilities coming into contact. Critics such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha argue that empowerment resides outside of the nation state, a fact that Adichie’s work both echoes and contests. The reader is therefore propelled into a reading that transgresses the boundaries of national and cosmopolitan identity, as the transformative impact of border crossing becomes a catalyst for the emergence of a new diasporic subject. In *Americanah*, nonetheless, this double consciousness often fails to instigate empowerment, and is instead often experienced as “paralyzing in-betweenness.” In the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes that,

> it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks
on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness; an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (9)

In the short segment above, the imposition of white hegemonic gaze puts blackness under surveillance, and through the use of sympathetic identification classifies it as contemptible and pitiful. In *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*, Nicholas Creary calls attention to the construction of whiteness throughout Enlightenment and European modernity. As Creary notes, the establishment of whiteness as the epitome of humanity in western intellectual discourse perpetuates a binary construction between human and inhuman, European and African. Creary suggests that to counter the ways in which the existence of a black human becomes oxymoronic, African writing needs to disengage from colonial discourses and to challenge the human/inhuman binary they propose.

In my work, I propose the use of surveillance studies as a method to explore the ways in which blackness resists white hegemonic imaginaries. I am specifically invested in the role of sousveillance or reverse surveillance, a practice that aims to challenge knowledge formation by recording snippets of diasporic experience from the perspective of the black immigrants. This practice aims to counter the official archives of the state that often circumscribe blackness in terrains of vulnerability. The historical ways (via run away slave advertisements or census reports) and the contemporary ways (through CCTV, biometric technologies, airport security, stop-and-frisk policies and personal data infringement among others) in which the black body is subjected to surveillance, urge us to revisit sousveillance as a means to counter the violence of the white hegemonic archive. Forms of sousveillance in the contemporary moment, such as civilian recordings of law enforcement officers on duty, have catalyzed acts of resistance against
police brutality, and opened up a platform for the contestation of other forms of systematic injustice. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne defines sousveillance according to Steve Mann’s theory, who views it as “a way of naming an active inversion of the power relations that surveillance entails,” as it is performed “by an entity not in a position of power or authority over the subject of the veillance” (19). In turn she argues that “dark sousveillance… plots imaginaries that are oppositional and … hopeful for another way of being,” while it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with anti-black surveillance” (21).

In this chapter, I argue that Adichie’s novel and Ifemelu’s blog, on a metatextual level, serve as technologies of sousveillance, which enable the emergence of an emancipatory counter-archive of blackness. Following Fanon and Walcott, Browne writes, that “epidermalization” which is “the imposition of race on the body,” signals “‘blackness as sign, one that carries with it particular histories of resistance and domination, [and is a topic that is] always under constestation’” (8). Surveillance, “the fact of antiblackness” as Browne contents imposes a precarious sympathetic identification, in which, to borrow James Baldwin’s words, the onlooker is at best feeling “bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you” (10). Sousveillance enables what Cade Bambara refers to as a healing moment for “our imperialized eyes,” or an “oppositional gaze…one that looks to document” in hooks terms (10).

**Blackness: Spectacularity V. Singularity**

Blackness, as topos and epidermis, is the primary feature of Toyin Ojih Odutola’s portraiture. Odutola uses black ballpoint pen, graphite, pastel and charcoal to illuminate, challenge, and unsettle aesthetic representations of blackness. The palpable materiality of her portraiture is the
outcome of the accumulation of lines that assign an architectural structure to the work, due to an elaborate layering technique that assigns movement. Public figures, her family, and herself are often depicted in her work; however, as poet Claudia Rankine notes in “A New Grammar for Blackness,” it is not the people depicted that is her subject matter, but rather “the space of blackness itself.”
I Wish You Would, Toyin Ojih Odutola (2011)
Odutola, a first generation Nigerian American who grew up in Alabama, is familiar with the ways in which categories of blackness take shape in the white hegemonic imaginary. Her familial trajectory, from Nigeria to a university campus in the United States, where her father was a newly appointed professor, resembles Ifemelu’s narrative in terms of the racial categories that emerge in the aftermath of such an immersion in the American culture. To resist the unifying and singular understanding of black identity, Odutola in her work “explores how to desegregate blackness from a fixed racial position and open it out to all the mythology, missteps, racism, beauty, and life that is held by the term, while still landing it within the free space of bodies” (Rankine). As Rankine further notes, Odutola, “complicates the historical pull, in a white supremacist frame, toward blackness as ‘simply’ a racial demarcation”. Rather she enables a “peripatetic blackness” by depicting all of her subjects regardless of their race in black ink. As the artist says in an interview with Zachary Rosen for “Africa as a Country,” “I think about what other people read in the work and it’s interesting, they find other things that they like, but for me it’s always been the skin.” Her fascination with the epidermis as an assortment of sensibilities and aesthetics is an empowering prism for the exploration of blackness. By juxtaposing the spectacularity of blackness in its interplay with structure, light, and tone, Odutola resist the singular, monolithic readings of it in the white hegemonic imaginary. Odutola’s documentation of blackness, an intimate form of sousveillance, procures a palpable archive to be read outside of racial demarcations and cultural projections. Nonetheless, Odutola warns us toward the perilous function of the visual and suggests a complementary engagement that would allow nuanced discussions on blackness to resume: “We live in a world where we’re so inundated with visual language that people think they know what they’re seeing when they don’t. So you need literature to hone it into something very specific” (Rosen).
Politics of Respectability and Acts of Resistance

Before turning to an examination of the politics of respectability in *Americanah*, it is important to consider how new forms of identity emerge from diasporic crossings and how those are featured in contemporary literature. In *Twenty-first-century Fiction*, Peter Boxall writes that 21st c. novels often revolve around narratives that foreground the disruption of national sovereignty and the porosity of national boundaries. The global circulation of populations and ideas becomes a central tenet of the contemporary moment given the impact of globalization and neoliberalism. However, when it comes to contemporary novels that narrate dispossession in postcolonial settings, such as *Americanah*, we observe the reverse trajectory: a rejection of postcolonial hybridity and the retention of national markers of difference. In spite of her gradual immersion in American culture, mostly attained through her intimate relationships, Ifemelu is holding on to Nigerian identity. Even when her public performances resemble those of her American counterparts, a fact that becomes quite evident in the opening scene of the book at the braiding salon, her reflections upon why she is performing her American identity evoke a DuBoisian double consciousness that makes transparent the scopic regimes embedded in this social interaction. As the African hairdresser braids Ifemelu’s hair, Ifemelu performs along American societal norms, a performance that nonetheless offers her insights on the conceited narratives she has adopted as part of her diasporic identity. Her visit soon becomes a catalyst for her gradual regression to a Nigerian sense of cultural propriety, which she also appears to resist later. Boxall notes that in previous works by Adichie an interesting balancing act appears in delineating the limits of cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Similarly here, although the novel debunks the former, it seems that embracing the latter is far from a resolution. As a result, new
possibilities for connection emerge, which in turn gesture towards the important role that
diasporic communities have in narrating their own stories in the context of postcolonialism.

Respectability politics is a useful terrain to explore the interlocking gazes performed
vertically and horizontally in public life. A useful classification tool for bourgeois societies,
colonial and postcolonial, politics of respectability imply profound knowledge of the ways in
which witnessing and performing social interactions contributes to the enforcement of
hierarchies. Ifemelu appears quite well versed in observing, appropriating and performing Afro-
centric and US-centric versions of respectability politics. As she reminisces about her life in
Nigeria before her arrival to the United States, she reflects upon her father’s politics of
respectability, which she finds complicit with colonialism and the nascent cosmopolitanism of
the Nigerian bourgeoisie. Ifemelu recalls that,

her father’s English bothered her as she got older, because it was costume, his shield
against insecurity. He was haunted by what he did not have—a postgraduate degree, an
upper middle class life—and so his affected words became his armor. She preferred it
when he spoke Igbo; it was the only time he seemed unconscious of his own anxieties.

(58)

Returning to Igbo, an indication of nationalism, becomes a grounding moment for Ifemelu and a
comforting practice that enables a sense of belonging. Similarly, when Ifemelu’s family runs into
financial difficulty and the family’s performance of respectability politics is at stake, Ifemelu
grounds her father to mundane everyday interactions to keep his mind from the shame of the
public spectacle that the “loud unnecessary banging [of the landlord on their door] for the benefit
of the neighbors” instigated (91). Ifemelu asks for her father’s help with homework hoping that
her student status, which is in accordance with his desire for upward mobility would “distract
him and] make it seem that life could happen again” (91).

However, when Ifemelu arrives in the United States, her sense of identity is at stake, and
so is the identity of Auntie Uju, who feels overwhelmed by the challenges of every day life.
Ifemelu feels disconcerted to see Auntie Uju’s “entire being at a perilous edge, about to tip
over,” a sentiment that soon describes Ifemelu’s diasporic experience as well (141). As financial
difficulties and social isolation loom over her, Ifemelu feels that her actions are perceived by
others as “yet another foreign pathology” (157). When her roommate’s dog eats a slice of bacon
that Ifemelu saved for her meal, the offensive response of the roommate, “You better not kill my
dog with voodoo,” provokes Ifemelu’s rage, who barely manages to stop before hitting her
(187). Ifemelu feels distraught with the collapse of her composure. She feels that she was,
at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of
faceless people who were all against her. It terrified her, to be unable to visualize
tomorrow. When her parents called and left a voice message, she saved it, unsure if
that would be the first time she would hear their voices. To be here, living abroad, not
knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety. (187)
The ways in which the sentiment of nostalgia viscerally registers is indicative of Ifemelu’s
physical immersion in the diasporic space, a location in which she feels at once invisible vis-à-
vis people’s indifference and hypervisible due to their constant monitoring of her behavior, later
on realized in novel in the roommate’s frantic call to relay the events to others. Ifemelu “felt

26 For more on the imperative to challenge Western media portrayals of sub-Saharan Africa as a space of
conflict, epidemics, and corruption, see A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material
Culture and Language by Brenda Cooper.
27 For an analysis of Baucom’s theory of melancholy realism in conjunction with Adichie’s intertwining of
the corporeal and the political see Dalley’s The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the
Representation of Contested Pasts.
like a small ball adrift and alone,” unable to connect, or belong in a space that consistently
engulfs her in vulnerability (190). The binary between the two cultures seems all the more
irreconcilable when a friend points out that she might be suffering from depression. Drawing
from her Nigerian background, Ifemelu’s understanding of mental illness at the time is one she
cannot identify with, as she attributes her sadness and helplessness to the immense hardship that
she faces on a daily basis, rather than on a vague psychological construct that appears to be
loosely defined. With the hindsight of experience she later reflects that,

Depression was what was happened to Americans, with their self-absolving need to turn
everything into an illness. She was not suffering from depression; she was merely a little
tired and a little slow. “I don’t have depression she said. Years later, she would blog
about this: “on the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering from Illnesses Whose
Names They Refuse to Know.” (194)

Analyzing the performative and ocular functions of respectability politics gives us insights on the
ways in which bodies succumb to surveillance, and reveals important clues about citizenship as a
hierarchical construct. Ifemelu organizes her perceptions of homeland by observing and
tweaking performances of civil engagement, and in so doing, procures a mapping of sociable
affects that enables her survival.

Shortly after her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu turns to reading in an attempt to
figure out blackness in the US context. First, she borrows books suggested by her partner
Obinze, who is an avid proponent of American literature. Later on as she expands the scope of
her search, she finds texts that speak to her own fixations with American culture. These texts
have a transformative effect on her, for “as she read, America’s mythologies began to take on
meaning, America’s tribalisms—race, ideology, and religion—became clear. And she was
consoled by her new knowledge” (167). Ifemelu’s newly acquired knowledge affords her a more nuanced understanding of the culture of the United States, and catalyzes her decision to create an archive of black diasporic experience. This practice of sousveillance aims to counter the ways in which blackness is inscribed collectively as an identity in the archive, and constitutes an act of resistance against the surveillance that her body is subjected to in the spaces she traverses as a black immigrant.

**Intimate Terrains: Sexual Performances and Identity Formation**

To theorize the function of sousveillance as a counter-archival practice, I will briefly turn to the ways in which Ifemelu intimately engages with her partners in the United States. As I will show, these intimate engagements mirror Ifemelu’s trajectory of belonging as an immigrant subject, a trope consistent with Adichie’s previous work. In “Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Eromosele argues that in Adichie’s previous works desire becomes a revolutionary force against patriarchal oppression and religious fundamentalism, as the characters’ desire functions as common ground for the establishment of affiliations, in spite of their diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Eromosele contents that Adichie engages in graphic depictions of sex in order to underscore the humanity of her characters, while desire becomes a means of empowerment, allowing the characters to exert control over a collapsing social order.

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28 For more on narrative techniques drawn from Nigerian cultural practices and storytelling see “Who Speaks? Who Listens? : The Problem Of Address In Two Nigerian Trauma Novels.” by Amy Novak. The author notes the importance of bearing witness to neocolonial trauma in ways unmediated by Western narrative forms.

29 In *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts*, Dalley makes an epistemological claim about a non-formalist version of realist historical fiction, with strong dialectical and inter-textual components, that offers a more engaging venue for the contestation of colonial narratives.
The reversal of gender roles both within and outside of the sex act contributes to the debunking of class hierarchies and a more egalitarian view of Nigerian society.

In *Americanah* sexual encounters are similarly constitutive of agency and emancipatory praxis. Ifemelu’s sexual engagements or romantic relationships connect her intimate life with her immigrant positionality. Each intimate encounter that Ifemelu participates in mirrors her relationship to the land.\(^{30}\) Her first intimate encounter in the United States is traumatic and transactional. Asphyxiated by accumulating debt and lack of income, Ifemelu half-heartedly agrees to perform a sexual act for money. This act of prostitution is analogous to Ifemelu’s journey to the States. She engages in it, with pain and reluctance, in search of a way out of her financial troubles. The aftermath is devastating. Ifemelu’s sense of self is shattered, and soon she ceases to communicate with her loved ones and falls in an acute depression that leaves her depleted. Her second intimate encounter is a long-term relationship with Curt, an affluent white American, portrayed as the ideal partner by white hegemonic standards in terms of his appearance and affect. Curt encapsulates the promise of the American Dream, a fantasy of belonging, inclusion, and prosperity that is historically associated with narratives of immigration to the United States. Ifemelu’s disinterested stance towards him and the gradual deflation of his appeal a few years later are indicative of the perils and pleasures of immigrant nostalgia. Curt might seem to be an ideal partner by a stereotypically American rubric, but his lack of complexity, from Ifemelu’s perspective, and his carefree lifestyle results in a rather bitter break up. Ifemelu’s next partner, Blaine, is an African American Professor at Yale, who complies with*

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\(^{30}\) As Strehle points out in "Producing Exile: Diasporic Vision in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*," Adichie engages in a similar practice in her previous works. In order to illustrate the failure of the nation in the Nigerian paradigm she creates metaphors for Nigerian public history through the private lives of fictitious characters. The diasporic vision of the novel focuses on two tenets, the trajectory of the community in the public realm on the one hand, and the fracture of domesticity and private life on the other.
the socially engaged partner model that Ifemelu envisages on her side. With him, Ifemelu shares political affinities that crystalize in the face of Obama. His commitment to live an examined life enamors her; yet, his detached academic demeanor soon starts to estrange Ifemelu. Blaine is an allegory for the hope brought to life by the Obama presidency; yet, while he serves as the embodiment of hope for the deliverance of social justice, his alienating abstraction and incessant theorization, much like the unfulfilled promises of the Obama administration, leave Ifemelu unsated. Finally, Obinze, the Nigerian partner of her youth, whom she meets upon returning to Lagos, represents the comfortably familiar, painfully imperfect terrains of one’s own culture. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and finds Obinze married, she rekindles their affair, an act that is against the politics of respectability she has negotiated through her life. By performing this claim of ownership over the intimate terrains of her youth, Ifemelu assumes a hybrid version of her Nigerian and American identities, which violently collide as she settles back to life in Nigeria with an American mentality.

This visceral engagement with the land and its politics of inclusion, embalmed in desire, and projected on the men Ifemelu becomes intimate with in the narrative, is an act of resistance against a colonial literary tradition, in which the land is historically effeminized. In the deft sculpting of this extended allegory of public and private intimacies, Adichie contributes two crucial innovations to the genre of the novel; on the one hand, she unsettles the colonial imaginary that genders the land as female and subsequently reproduces fantasies of conquest; while on the other hand, she veers from contemporary Anglophone traditions that conflate domesticity and nationalism.31

31 For more on how postcolonial literature enables aesthetic variations on the novel as a means to counter Eurocentric colonial legacies see Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts, by Hamish Dalley and African Intellectuals and Decolonization, by Nicholas Creary.
Adichie is steadfast in her commitment to unsettle the binary between the public and the private, as her previous work illustrates. In *The People’s Right to the Novel*, Coundouriotis points out that Adichie does not use the domestic as a symbol of the nation, a common trope in most postcolonial works. Instead she suggests that the nation “folds into the home” and legitimizes the political relations or conflicts that emerge therein. In *Americanah*, Adichie takes the home, which is already politicized in a Nigerian context, and embeds it in the intimate engagements Ifemelu sustains with her partners across the Atlantic. The repercussions of contemporary dispossessions are similar to those that catalyzed the politicizing effect of the domestic in previous works by Adichie; yet, the sphere of the domestic is now a sphere of intimacy that is not necessarily defined by the bonds of marriage. This shift is crucial for the representation of female agency in the novel. The reimagining of public and private, nationalist and transnationalist, intimate and visceral, affords Ifemelu freedom to express an archive of experiences that is untethered to discourses of patriarchy and colonialism. Ifemelu’s non committal, exploratory, sensual engagement with these men, challenges the politics of respectability projected upon women’s bodies, and offers a provocative affront against the surveillance tactics that monitor unsanctioned intimate relations.

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32 Adichie’s previous work, *Half of a Yellow Sky* and *The Purple Hibiscus* reflect on the ways in which the ramifications of historical events and religious fundamentalism are crucial to the development of discourses around home and belonging in post-war Nigeria.

33 For a postcolonial feminist critique of the domestic as a space of contestation for imperial and national agendas see *Transnational Women’s Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland* by Susan Strehle.

34 See *Transnational Women’s Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland* by Susan Strehle. Strehle offers an overview of western feminist perspectives on domesticity, from Poovey’s theory of the domestic as apolitical, to Armstrong’s analysis of the gendering of private spheres.

The historical significance of this move is monumental and fosters emancipatory potential, if one considers that the perpetuation of slavery relied upon mechanisms of surveillance and subjugation, which contained black female bodies and flourished from their reproductive capacities. Based on my earlier contention that each of these men stand as allegories for different stages of immigrant experience and historic happenstance, it follows that Ifemelu’s sensory interaction with them articulates a counter-archive of lived experience through an act of sousveillance. These accounts are recorded in her blog in the form of observations surrounding the scopic exchanges that she was part and parcel of in the United States as she was navigating these relationships.

The ordering of events in the novel, attained through the linear recounting of the protagonist’s intimate relationships, invites scorn from a feminist perspective, given Ifemelu’s consistent dependence on her partners’ financial and social status for survival. It is also hard to ignore the postfeminist currents that all too often appear in the novel, in which emphasis is placed on the monetary possessions, luxurious surroundings, and capitalist aspirations of the protagonists. However, Boxall reminds us that novels in the twenty first century have undergone a transformation of narrative structure with regards to space and time. He perceives of this dynamic as an outcome of shifting geopolitical conditions, which make the novel a product of the global capital market. I find Boxall’s argument helpful in deciphering why a novel that is a repository of moments of unbelonging, interspersed with mishaps both societal and financial, has a series of unfulfilling relationships serving as its backbone. Since physical spaces and


37 For a postcolonial perspective on time as a disjointed framework, see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provinvializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.
intimate terrains are not impervious to the circulation of global capital and the loose regulation of neoliberal markets,\(^{38}\) structural transformations like migration reorganize our perception of time and lived experience.\(^{39}\) In this case, the allegorical relation between each man and the moment he appears in Ifemelu’s immigrant trajectory corresponds with a new societal and fiscal reconfiguration. The passage from traumatic displacement (the tennis coach),\(^{40}\) to experiencing the fissures of the American Dream (Curt), to the ennui of American bourgeois life (Blaine), to finally returning to an embattled homeland (Obinze), is not merely a trajectory of Ifemelu’s intimate connections but an arrangement of the socioeconomic spaces that she moves through.

The detailed recounting of Ifemelu’s life constitutes an alternative archival practice. The novel becomes a repository of her immigrant experience that is replete with minutiae. The narrator fixates on the mundane and trivial aspects of every day life and inundates the reader with excessive detail that slows down the development of the plot. In a sense this practice is similar to the assortment of stimuli and information that immigrants process in large numbers in an attempt to familiarize themselves with their new terrains. To produce new forms of knowledge, it is imperative to record everyday experiences in detail, a practice consistent with the principles of sousveillance.

In Ifemelu’s case, her blog serves as a digital archive of observations and social critique.

Boxall’s analysis of the development of the novel accounts for that the emergence of a new set of technological protocols that ordain time and space and propel the novel’s engagement with

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38 For more on neocolonial tactics strategized and implemented by global financial authorities, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), see Nicholas Creary’s Introduction in *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*.

39 For more on the relationship between geopolitics and contemporary Anglophone literature see *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*, by John Marx.

40 For more on the double traumatization of Nigerians from nationalism and colonialism see Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman’s essay, “Trauma and Narrativity in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*: Privileging Indigenous Knowledge in Writing the Biafran War,” in Nicholas M. Creary’s edited collection *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*. 
contemporary subjectivity into a globalized world. Similarly *Americanah* is interspersed with Ifemelu’s blog posts, which serve curatorial, documentary, and communicational purposes. The blog becomes a syncretic space for the curation of Ifemelu’s experiences and in typical neoliberal fashion enables her to achieve monetary independence for the first time. In so doing, the blog becomes an instrument for the sousveillance of race relations and an enabling medium for Ifemelu’s visibility. In other words, it serves as an emancipatory platform, in which communal views about race relations are developed, contested, and informed.

The audience of the blog is Ifemelu’s imaginary readers as well as Adichie’s actual readers. The blog serves to foster a community that engages in different forms of sousveillance through their reading, comments, and participation. Similarly, narrative withholding works to create a sense of community and to heighten the readers’ engagement with the life narratives of the protagonists. Through the plot’s slow twists and turns, the readers embark on a prolonged suspenseful study of the protagonists’ lives. In the next segment, I turn to empathic identification and examine the ways in which narrative withholding complicates the function of witnessing and alludes to the hierarchical categorization of immigrant life along the lines of race, class, and gender.

**Affordances of Sympathy and Immigrant Sentience**

Ifemelu’s recognition of sympathy as perilous comes into the text on several occasions, particularly when she feels that her new identity confines her to the position of someone always on the receiving end of pity. Even when surrounded by kindness and generosity, Ifemelu is nostalgic for the familiar terrains and safety nets that her homeland affords her. The empathetic identification that often emerges from her encounters with others makes the comparison between
home and away evident: “Ifemelu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from a country of people who gave and not of those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy” (209). Underlying her lamentation is the acknowledgement of an implicit hierarchy of subject positions engendered through empathic identification, in which Ifemelu feels confined. In her blog post about American tribalism, she reflects on the ways in which her identity becomes a token of empathic identification for others, a sympathy which often comes at a high cost. Well-versed in sousveillance strategies that enable her to navigate American terrains with grace and propriety, Ifemelu observes that her encounter with Kelsey, a liberal American, can be trickier than one might expect. Ifemelu “…recognized in Kelsey the nationalism of liberal Americans who copiously criticized America but did not like you to do so: they expected you to be silent and grateful, and always reminded of how much better than wherever you had come from America was” (233). In spite of Ifemelu’s immersion in white hegemonic culture and the empathic identification that she inspired, her curtailed rights are evident vis-à-vis the international border. When Curt decides to surprise her with an impromptu trip to Paris, Ifemelu is exasperated, “I just can’t get up and go to Paris. I have a Nigerian passport. I need to apply for a visa, with bank statements and health insurance and all sorts of proof that I won’t stay and become a burden to Europe” (242). This hierarchical division is evident when Ifemelu starts looking for her first legal job post-graduation. In spite of her academic record and her performance during the interviews, Ifemelu gets disconcerted after her prospective employers “…became non committal when they realized she was not an American citizen, [and] that they would, if they hired her, have to descend into the dark tunnel of immigration paperwork” (249). Once more, Curt comes to the rescue and offers to contact a business associate, who might be
willing to sponsor Ifemelu’s visa. Soon Ifemelu is able to start her life as a young professional in
the U. S. but nonetheless, she feels bittersweet about the authority that her lover possesses, “She
felt in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange
the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (250).

The curtailed status that empathic identification affords her, is replaced with an
emancipatory, visceral form of sentience when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria. Upon her arrival in
Lagos, Ifemelu is immersed in the rich sensorium that the city emanates, which propels her
thinking about the moments she has missed as a diasporic subject: “in the gray of the evening
darkness, the air burdened with smells, she ached with an almost unbearable emotion she could
not name. It was nostalgic and melancholy, a beautiful sadness for the things she had missed and
the things she would never know” (478).

This visceral engagement with her surroundings enables Ifemelu to remap affective, visual,
olfactory, and haptic registers that she encountered in her early life in Nigeria before
immigrating to the U.S. In this way, Ifemelu reconnects with her heritage and claims her
positionality within this sensory space.

The sensory clues that Ifemelu harnesses from her surroundings simultaneously ground
her and offer her a point of departure. They also enable her to construct an alternative archival
practice that places emphasis on affect and lived experience. Later on in the novel, as she
contemplates her return with growing concern, the reader is presented with a visceral description
of how Ifemelu experiences this:

The coolness dissipated quickly. Warm, humid air gagged the room, and soon Ifemelu
was tossing in the wetness of her own sweat. A painful throbbing had started behind her
eyes and a mosquito was buzzing nearby and she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she
had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay. (481)

To conclude, as these two short excerpts illustrate, the affective clues of the text give rise to a visceral engagement with it. Unlike the structures of empathetic identification that subsequently cause hierarchical division, this return to affect as Ifemelu settles in Nigeria suggests the fulfillment of the nostalgic imperative to return, and connotes an emancipatory duality emerging from the option to go back to the United States. This veering between the two, reflected in Ifemelu’s embodied and thus viscerally manifest reaction, is aligned with the turn of contemporary Anglophone literature away from the binary between the national and transnational, and towards a hybrid identity, which in this case encompasses elements from both Nigerian and American cultures.
Chapter Four

Graph-ing Women In Flight: Ruminations on Citizenship and Abjection from *Persepolis* to the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

Scheherazade, the mythical storyteller, told a thousand and one stories to survive misogyny. She was eventually outlived by it, but her masterful storytelling of others’ deeds allowed her to keep her head, and in so doing to possess sovereign power in a space where her life was previously disposable. Under the premise of telling her goodbyes to her sister while awaiting execution, Scheherazade created a narrative platform to lure her audience and ensure her survival. Her imaginative storytelling allowed her to persevere in two crucial ways, on the one hand, recounting her stories afforded her ostensible omniscience, and with it a legible place in the public arena as an observer and a witness; and on the other hand, the thrill her stories inspired turned Scheherazade into a sensation, the incubator of an affective engagement that promised perseverance and futurity. As she embarked on an uncertain experiment with seriality, Scheherazade managed to regulate plot development and narrative withholding, and in so doing kept her future executioner, hooked. She survived.

As Scheherazade’s mythic tale migrated, as tales often do, from the Middle East to the Western world, the fragments of it that survived spoke to the gifts of a charismatic storyteller who was able to procure her husband’s affection in spite of his intent to kill her as a punishment for womankind’s infidelity. The abuse of the tyrant, her imaginative act of resistance, and her entrapment in a domestic union so predatory that her head was at stake were mere marginalia, telling signs of an era long gone.
Scheherazade’s story is a testament to the power of authorial agency often denied to women narrators by societal schemas and hegemonic structures perpetuating patriarchy, and a reminder of women’s disenfranchisement under totalitarian regimes. When women’s contributions to the formation of the public sphere are deemed less worthy than those of men, our experiences remain dismissed or, at best, mediated and heavily edited.

This final chapter, “Graph-ing the Female in Flight” presents an examination of textual and visual representations of survival in the face of hardship, featuring narratives of women escaping oppressive regimes and historical disasters. The contemporary tales that emerge, narratives of migration, border crossing, and presumed citizenship, constitute in many ways alternate auto-curatorial genres of testimony, hybrid forms that encompass text and imagery. Among them, graphic memoirs and self-portraiture place emphasis on the agency of women narrators. These texts attempt a reordering of our perception of lived experience in the space of Middle East and the Global South and urge the reader to ethically engage with narratives of dispossession. Ethical engagement is in turn premised on the acknowledgement of sentimental sympathy as perilous, due to the hierarchical subject positions that it engenders with its vertical distribution from those in position of power to those suffering under siege. To enable the development of an ethics of witnessing, I argue that an epistemological shift from empathetic identification to affect as sentience and visceral feeling is necessary. This veering is crucial to circumvent the ways in which identification, enabled through cognitive processing, creates a chasm between subject positions, relegated to those who witness and those who suffer, a chasm that subsequently solidifies global power structures.

In this chapter, I examine imagery documenting the Syrian Refugee crisis vis-a-vis Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, and aim to show how the hybridity of these genres enables the
authors of these “texts” to bear witness to their life narratives. I argue that the reclamation of
authorial agency is attained through the deft command of the representational means that record
lived experience. Thinking of Satrapi’s *Persepolis* as an inaugural text for the emergence of
women’s visual testimony in the space of the Middle East, I am expanding the geographical
scope of this chapter to argue that contemporary forms of dispossession observed and enacted in
the space of the Mediterranean raise questions about the construction of citizenship in a
neoliberal, globalized, and increasingly polarized world. In the course of this chapter, I discuss
how I traced media representations of refugee women along their journey, and the difficulty I
had parsing through images from different sources that I deemed suitable or unsuitable given my
theoretical investment in the precarious call for sentimental sympathy that these images
instigated. Finding biopolitics and psychoanalysis limited in their scope, I expand my analytical
lens and turn to critical race theory and feminisms of color critique to argue that a discourse of
abjection is staged upon the specter of the residual and fungible migrant, upon the narrative of
trespassing and border crossing, and upon sensualized accounts of dispossessed non-citizens in
flight.

I also argue that seriality performs an important affective function that in turn procures an
emancipatory narrative method for textual and visual stories of dispossession. Reflected in the
form and content of Satrapi’s graphic novel, the documentary photography of the Syrian Refugee
crisis, and social media narratives of refugee struggle, seriality provokes a visceral response to
narrative story-telling—suspense. Seriality as method disrupts the framework of empathic
identification and sentimentalist sympathy, as the frequent lack of consistent platform for the
dissemination of these stories, in conjunction with the narrative withholding conditioned by the
uncertain circumstances these stories relay, leave the audience unsated. The lack of narrative
closure, as well as the cuts, breaks, and divisions often evident in the layout of such platforms (the architecture of comics and social media sites) is analogous to the experience of immigration and border crossing, thereby immersing the audience in a narrative space that in a meta textual way resembles the uncertainty of new uncharted and often fragmentary terrains.

Seriality as method is crucial to the construction of an alternative archive of dispossession, as the visceral engagement triggered by suspense unsettles the hierarchical divisions that empathic identification puts in place. This sensate engagement is not co-eval with the autonomous liberal subject of the archive, but rather implies access to a pre-subjectivized and pre-racialized subject.

“Graph-ing” Life: Storytelling

“Graphing,” a hybrid category consisting of text and imagery, encapsulates the multiple registers of storytelling. Stemming from Greek “γράφειν,” meaning to write or draw, graphing encapsulates the multimodal register in which these stories unfold, encompassing the textual and visual dimensions of storytelling. The term also alludes to the confines of storytelling as these stories are graphed – delineated or circumscribed – in a representational sphere that marks non-conforming authorial voices and hybrid genres as illegible. Expanding on epistemological paradigms of the digital era, the term also applies to the contemporary use of graphs in the visual representation of quantitative information. Resisting the tendency to treat the refugee crisis as an abstract logistical problem revolving around the accumulation of numbers, a treatment that dehumanizes the men and women partaking in the refugee movement, graphing also alludes to the bureaucratic apparatus of contemporary hegemonic states, and the imperative to resist the
logic of racial calculus that reverberates in the afterlife of colonial states as discussed in the previous chapters.

Dispossession, as I argue elsewhere, is a multifarious concept whose current definition encompasses state brutality, extreme poverty, human trafficking, religious fundamentalism, feminicide, and other practices that victimize women and contain them in spaces of vulnerability. In this chapter, I specifically focus on precariousness and dispossession in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, and trace women’s lives in flight in an effort to listen attentively to the stories they tell. I expand the scope of my analysis to examine the scopic regimes that codify dispossession in the visual material circulated through other media venues, and I explore the impact that these scopic functions have on the perceived humanity of the women depicted, and on their curtailed rights as citizens and humans vis-a-vis the border.

I. *Persepolis*: A Migratory Bildungsroman that Trespassed the Borders of the Cropped Frame.

In my attempt to find a model for the narratives of displacement and the agentic witnessing that I envisage as an ethical alternative for the depiction of the Syrian Refugee Crisis, I begin with Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, an autobiographical text in the form of a graphic memoir. *Persepolis* is an expansive bildungsroman, which narrates Marjane’s coming of age during the Islamic revolution, showing how profoundly her life is affected by the political circumstances that surround her. The story is depicted in black and white, and allows the readers through their vicarious witnessing to connect with the protagonist, using the clean slate of childhood as fertile ground for the emergence of identification.
As Marjane, the protagonist, develops her affinities in terms of politics, class, and resistance, readers follow her through claustrophobic frames and negative space, and are transported to the asphyxiating world of her younger years. Satrapi’s minimalist expressionism, as Hillary Chute points out in *Graphic Women*, and the fast paced narrative, both visual and textual, unsettles the readers as the world of the text seems volatile and mutable with every turn of the page. The depictions of Marjane and the rest of the protagonists, mostly family members and political figures that resist the establishment, are static, indicative of the lack of mobility that Marjane encounters as a girl and later on as a woman within a patriarchal and totalitarian regime.
During childhood, her character is often portrayed center stage in a world that is fixed, rigid and unwelcoming. However, in spite of the grave confinement that Marjane’s body succumbs to within the frame, we as readers are consistently given the events from her viewpoint. The mise en scene is staged at Marjane’s eye level enabling us as interlocutors to see the story through her eyes and sense the impact the events have on her psyche. This framing is egalitarian and potentially agentic for Marjane, as it implies that her narrative is not mediated through the prism of adulthood, but is rather voiced through Marjane’s observations of her direct surroundings.
Marjane’s audience navigates with her the space of childhood and the terrain of post-Islamic revolution Iran and by the end of the book senses the imperative for her removal from this space, and her forthcoming migratory crossing to France, textually realized in the second book of the series. Marjane’s escape to France comes at a great cost, as she feels estranged and traumatized. The readers observe her transition coded in the book not only by her adolescent body, but also by her androgynous look, employed to indicate her sense of liminality in an unclear identificatory space. The queer space that emerges fosters emancipatory potential as Marjane’s gender bending body flees the regime’s territorial confines, and is in turn immersed in an uncertain spatial, linguistic, and cultural terrain, which nonetheless she does not identify as her own.
This transition is formally depicted in the second book, where the visual staging of Marjane’s adventures conveys her struggle for self-determination in spatial terms. As the frame closes up on Marjane’s body that is entering adulthood, we are reminded of the ways in which we, along with Marjane, traversed narrative space in the past. Our narrative identification with her, which afforded some space for movement in the first book, now entraps us further in densely populated frames, instigating a claustrophobic, ominous sentiment. During Marjane’s childhood, we were curiously able to find outlets of hope in the frame’s visual horizon through the use of negative space and perspective. For instance, as the figures of the daughters of the revolution loomed over Marjane creating solid pillars of confinement, our identification with the young hero enabled us to see beyond that, envisioning routes for escape visually realized in the punctum of her white shirt proclaiming that “Punk is not ded” (sic), as well as in the space she takes up between the patriarchal totems. In depictions of Marjane’s life in Paris or of her return to Iran as featured in the second book, movement or perspective are no longer options, as the notion of exile that permeates the book closes in on her figure and asphyxiates both her and the reader. These visual
strategies are crucial to the rendering of the story and to our own engagement with the narrative of displacement that Marjane testifies to. (image from second book)

The spatial rendering of the frame shifts through time to reflect Marjane’s passage from childhood to adulthood, but in so doing achieves more than fulfilling the narrative premise of the bildungsroman. Instead it alludes to the way in which identity politics is imbricated in our exercise of empathy, as well as in the theory and practice of ethical witnessing. Going back to the minimalist rendering of the story, Satrapi’s choice to visualize it in black and white allows her to present a seemingly white character as the protagonist, and in so doing to escape the discriminatory gaze of a white hegemonic audience that might have been unwilling to sympathize with the migrant story of a person of color. Similar to the rendering in black and white, childhood serves as a clean slate for a rather flat form of identification to emerge. Marjane’s age, her parents’ secular upbringing, middle class status, and royal ancestry, as well as their reluctance to affirm their Muslim identity, makes this Iranian girl an easy empathic goal since her affective pull to the audience is instant.

As she grows older and articulates her stance against the regime, Marjane becomes an even more palatable terrain for a Western audience to identify with, as her values, politics and affinities show great resemblance to values, politics and affinities expressed by women in the Western world. A feminist vision emerges from her tale of totalitarianism and oppression, and we as readers feel drawn and compelled to affirm our support. In a closer look, this identificatory affiliation is misguided in its lack of consideration for the intersectional parameters that Satrapi leaves outside of narrative. Marjane is offering a personal narrative, but the historical circumstances she outlines are experienced by other women who share the same ethnic identity along with a variety of adjacent attributes that might appear unpalatable to a Western audience.
Marjane does not suffer under the Islamic Revolution merely because she is secular. She suffers because of religious fundamentalism and the imbrication of religion in a tumultuous political arena, often exacerbated by foreign intervention. Similarly, girls and boys like her, women and men, adults like the one she is gradually becoming, suffer equally under a regime that erases civil liberties and suppresses human rights under the pretense of blasphemy.

As Marjane moves out of childhood and into adulthood, the frame reflects her compromised mobility as her ethnic and religious identity registers in her surroundings (image). This relationship between the content conveyed, the displacement and asphyxiation, and the form, the visual grammar of the genre, is symbiotic. In *Disaster Drawn*, Hillary Chute suggests that “the print medium of comics offers a unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels suggestive of architecture,” and that it is “through its spatial syntax, [that] comics offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity and causality…”(4). The complex construct that emerges outside of the frame, what Chute refers to as the “architecture” of the genre, is as crucial to storytelling as the depictions within it. As we parse through the panels to construct meaning in our search for closure, the grids and gutters attempt an ordering of sensory experience that we navigate and fill in according to our hermeneutic hopes.

Chute addresses this conflation of the textual and the visual as “an inventive textual practice,” one that hopes “to express trauma ethically,” and in so doing she sheds light on the archival dimension of the genre (4). Her argument acquires additional gravity if we consider the ways in which the architecture of comics invites us to read the content relayed in the frames as a means of bearing witness. If comics is, as Chute argues, “a medium [that] places pressure on classifiability and provokes questions about the boundaries of received categories of genre,” then
how do we ethically engage with the multiple layers of experience recorded through it, as these layers pertain to the public and the private (1)?

Thinking of the content of the frame as the depiction and ordering of lived experience provokes a discussion on the documentary strategies and curatorial ethics of comics. Chute notes that in spite of its divergence from genres that we traditionally associate with documentation and historical accuracy, comics is indeed about the synesthetic presentation of evidence. “In its succession of replete frames, comics calls attention to itself, specifically, as evidence,” Chute writes, and refers to the genre’s architecture to substantiate her argument: “comics makes a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar, by aggregating and accumulating frames of information” (2). In so doing, “…comics positions and enacts itself as a form of counter-inscription, ” which therefore recuperates personal trauma and private testimony from national and transnational historical archives (Chute 4). This perception of comics as an alternative account of lived experience, both private and public, signifies the ways in which women’s traumas survive through storytelling, not as omissions, but rather as “an excess of signification” (Chute 5). This excess is visually registered in the ways in which the genre calls for our attention, through its panels, repetitive rendering, and seriality.

Satrapi’s experiences of displacement and dispossession under the Islamic Revolution undergo a spatiotemporal mnemonic ordering based on a curatorial practice that stems from her commitment to bear witness. Comics offers the space and linearity for the imaginative counter-inscription that Chute emphasizes as a democratic means for the emergence of a counter archive, yet seriality, embedded in the form and propelled by it, might be the genre’s most distinctly documentary attribute. As the frames come together to bring one memory after the other before the readers’ eyes, the story is propelled towards a non-teleological end. The first book continues
into the second, and finally in their adaptation in film, but we, the readers, are left without closure, stripped of our hermeneutic privilege to find out what happens at the end of the story.

In my analysis of the Syrian Refugee Crisis, I will be returning to these spatiotemporal mnemonic scaffoldings, their architecture, and seriality, as I examine the documentary means through which the crisis has been recorded and relayed. Following the overarching theme of my quest, how to enable an agentic curatorial practice that leads to the ethical witnessing of the events, I will be looking at documentary photography, social media platforms, and activist work to figure out the ways in which fiction, identification, and empathy complicate the acts of bearing witness and offering historical documentation.

II. The Syrian Refugee Crisis in the Context of the Global South

In 2017, the Syrian Civil War entered its seventh year. A conflation of parameters including domestic totalitarianism and foreign intervention, inspired by geopolitical and economic incentives that have been in place since the Cold War, have resulted in one of the gravest humanitarian disasters in contemporary times. The Arab Spring and a renewed wave of interventionist politics, mostly realized through financial means in 2011, further exacerbated the political climate in Syria, leading to violent confrontations between the government lead by dictator Bashar al-Assad and rebel forces resisting Assad’s regime. As the conflict escalated, Syrians fled en masse to save their lives and to procure a viable future for their families.

In response to the flight of Syrian refugees, surrounding nations closed their borders leaving those fleeing with limited options. Entering Turkey and then securing passage to the Greek Islands soon became the most desirable and accessible route amongst refugees.
Individuals and families embarked on the uncertain journey in the Aegean Sea, paying excessive amounts of money to smugglers promising to help them cross. This lucrative trade flourished along the Turkish coast and as refugees put their lives once again in danger, NGOs, volunteers and activists on the Greek Islands assisted them with finding food and shelter, or applying for asylum upon arrival.

The Greek Government was unsuccessful in responding to the crisis unfolding. The austerity measures, an outcome of a financing crisis underway for almost a decade, and the antiquated infrastructure of the Greek Islands, along with the inadequate leadership of the Syriza government left the refugees unprotected, exposed to perilous weather conditions, hunger and disease. Surely, without the labor of NGOs, volunteers, and activists the loss of life would continue upon the refugees’ arrival on the Greek Islands.

The arrival of Syrian refugees was to many locals the reminder of a painful past. When Germans bombarded the Greek islands during the Second World War, Greeks sought refuge in the Middle East, where they lived on refugee camps until the end of the war. Childhood memories of Aleppo and Damascus still lingered in the minds and hearts of Greeks, former refugees, who fled from the Nazis in the 1940s. These have been days they thought humanity had left behind, only to be confronted with a mass migratory movement that spurred an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.

**Mediterranean Archipelagos: Lesvos and Lampedusa as Hot Spot Locations.**

The question today persists; how do we account for global citizenship vis-a-vis the mass migration that reckless international politics and predatory neoliberal schemas have engendered?
And how do conflicting national imaginaries and humanitarian discourses occlude international discussions on parity and citizenship? These issues animate my work, and I will be returning to them throughout this chapter in an effort to provide meaningful responses to the concept of citizenship in an era characterized by Brexit, the Trump Presidency, and a series of referenda on both sides of the Atlantic that aim to curtail civil liberties across the board.

In Mediterranean Frontiers. Borders, Conflict and Memory in a Transnational World, Nicolaidis and Bechev remind us of the elusiveness of the Mediterranean, a space that is more than “just a sea in between land masses, or a maritime ‘continent’ whose traces could be easily followed on a map, confounding all attempts at geographical reductionism.” (#) Rather, they argue the Mediterranean “appeals to the imaginary, forming a world composed of multiple narratives, inspiring as well as stirring political angst.” (#) It is “a geo-cultural ensemble whose coordinates shift according to historical time and the rhythms of memory, [and therefore] defy established rules and entrenched discourses which turn it into a mere border of Europe or even a blurry neighbourhood” (xi). I find compelling the role of memory in this palimpsestic definition of the Mediterranean as it alludes to the spectral presence of past migratory crossings from antiquity to contemporary times, and suggests the lingering afterlife of these historical exchanges, both material and conceptual. Harnessing these historical and cultural tangents is essential for the emergence of a counter-archive that addresses the polyphonic exchanges within this space.

Perceived of as the center of the known world in ancient times, a venue of cross-cultural exchange and thriving mercantilism, the Mediterranean is now recast as a threshold between the West and the Global South; its crossing simultaneously instigating hope for imperiled populations in flight, and fueling xenophobic rhetoric and exclusionary international politics. A
contrived legal conundrum lies at the epicenter of this tension. According to the provisions of the Dublin Regulation, incoming migrants seeking asylum are expected to complete the application process in their country of entry. If they are able to move further within the European Union without being granted asylum, migrants are apprehended and deported back to the point of entry, in this case the country that manages their ongoing asylum application. Of those requesting asylum, many migrants aware of the fiscal realities of the Eurozone prefer to submit applications for Northern European countries, particularly those with strong industries and flourishing economies. However, the onus befalls on the countries of entry to complete the paperwork and provide temporary assistance. In the previous years, Greece has been scrutinized for the unsanitary conditions and the poor quality of reception facilities across its borders. European countries have consequently denied deporting apprehended migrants back to Greece on the grounds of humanitarian concerns. Similarly the provisions of the Dublin Regulation have been circumvented during summer 2016 in light of the Greek financial crisis to enable Germany to directly process the vast number of asylum applications, predominantly from Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi populations fleeing ISIS. This convoluted legal framework fails to address the migrants’ needs and imperils them further by creating ruinous borderlands in which they remain indefinitely suspended.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben points out the precariousness of an existence in limbo, perpetuated by the position of the human subject outside the purview of the law. This relation of exception, Agamben argues, is a relation of ban: “He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it, but rather abandoned by it, that is exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (#) In this segment, Agamben alerts us to the
conditions of bare life, in the case of the Syrian Refugee crisis realized in the dehumanizing conditions that the border instigates and the exclusionary policies that are implemented along its physical contours. However, in light of the recent migratory movement across Europe, Agamben’s theory finds its utmost manifestation in the so-called Hotspot locations, otherwise known as refugee reception centers, which provide temporary accommodation and hunger relief to the migrants waiting to cross international borders. The lack of a unified policy on refugee reception across the EU, results in long delays and prolonged suffering; conditions that as international non-profit organizations point out are an infringement of international human rights.

As refugees wait for their future to take shape in the form of treaties and provisions, their passage is recorded through photographs and newspaper articles in local and international presses. The imagery that emerges either in support of their plight or against it complicates the ways in which their identities are construed, and fuels polemic discussions on citizenship and belonging on a global scale. The failure of the Dublin Regulation to address the migrating populations’ imperiled status as they remain indefinitely suspended in ruinous borderlands and hotspot locations exacerbate their sentiments of unrest and hopelessness, catalyze their resistance, and assist in their vilification in media reporting as they grapple with their liminal, invisible, yet hypervisible presence in the periphery of the EU.

**Belonging Citizenship and the Right to Bear Witness**

Reflecting on this messy conflation of inside and outside, of borderlessness and palpable boundness, Ariella Azullay argues in *Civil Imagination* that “under conditions of regime-made
disaster, citizenship is restricted to a series of privileges that only a portion of the governed population enjoys and even then to an unequal degree” (1), noting that “the central right that pertains to the privileged segment, is that they are able to view disaster – to be its spectator rather than to be subjected to it.” Citizenship and spectatorship are therefore closely intertwined, as one is construed as a citizen or a non-citizen based on the ability to exercise the gaze, on the ability to witness from a safe distance the crisis unfolding.

Following Azoulay’s contention, the formulation of an ethical stance towards the present humanitarian crisis is dependent on “refusing to identify disaster with the population upon whom it is inflicted.” (2) Similarly in their recent edited collection, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Judith Butler and Zaynep Gambetti, emphasize the need to move “beyond the human rights framework in which the positing of ‘vulnerable populations’ can become a way of foreclosing or devaluing modes of collective resistance among those designated as vulnerable.” (Butler VR 5-6) Instead they suggest that “…vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (Butler VR 22).

In search of a model to redress the precarious function of empathy procured through varied degrees of identification, I turn to Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking work on the transatlantic slave trade, and call attention to the dehumanizing narratives, predominantly visual, that remove agency and voice from refugee populations. To illustrate my point I will be citing an oft-repeated image of the refugee crisis, tracing its course from the Turkish coast to international media and social media venues, and finally to UN chambers as a point of contention between government officials debating policy change vis-à-vis the refugee crisis.

During a talk organized by the Council on Foreign relations in late September 2015, Peter Sutherland, the Special Representative of the Secretary – General of the UN for
International Migration, emphasized the corrosive storytelling that such visual media procure with regards to empathy in terms of their public reception and their ability to impact political action. “We get policy change literally on the hoof. The dreadful photograph of a dead body on a beach brings within days a significant increase in the number of people that some countries are prepared to take as refugees. A photograph did it. Are they idiots? Do they not know we have 3,000 dying every year, as we have been for years, drowning, and that many of them are children and women and people escaping who are refugees, and that this should have elicited a policy response, not the photograph of a terrible dead body on the beach” (sic)?

Sutherland references the image of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler found drown on the Turkish coast after the boat in which he and his family were on board was overturned by the waves. The image went viral, and was later reappropriated in multiple iterations in social media, to protest and mourn the lives of those lost at sea. These serial images were also used in an effort to procure the sentimental sympathy of the public, and hopefully to mobilize individuals and the state to take action.

Indeed Aylan’s image was efficient in awakening the humanitarian imagination of the spectator/citizen who witnessed the sight unaffected by the Syrian war, but it also managed to expose the caveat that empathic identification engenders for the subject mater of such graphic imagery. Western documentary photography and sentimental identification are co-extensive with western imperialism, the western gaze, and the colonial archive. Aylan’s photograph is a manifestation of the horrid events of the refugee crisis, but that only becomes evident and palpable to the spectator/citizen when the boy’s body, abject, lies dead on the shore. His shared humanity with us, the prerequisite of our empathy and the very tenet that this empathy validates,
is simultaneously nulled, as he is no longer living. His body becomes a contested terrain, of living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, deserving of empathy, yet no longer needing it.

Empathy, according to Saidiya Hartman, is “the phantasmic vehicle of identification (18).” It is through the incessant repetition of horrid imagery that we become desensitized to the violence inflicted on the human body; and worse still it is through the same imagery that we justify the subjugation of certain bodies to violence, acknowledging them as the bodies of others. Hartman writes that “by bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged…pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous,” (18) and in so doing warns us about “the spectacular nature of…suffering and the dissimulation of suffering through the spectacle” itself (22).

Going back to the image of the “terrible dead body” that Sutherland referred to, the affective underpinnings of the sight of the body at the site of the border are ordained by Kristeva’s notion of the abject, as discussed in *Powers of Horror*. Kristeva’s definition of abjection concerns human reactions, the affective responses incurred by “a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, or between self and other.” The insistent materiality of death brings that distinction to the forefront. “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be,” Kristeva writes, then “the corpse the most sickening of wastes is a border that has encroached upon everything.” (3) Kristeva is evidently not referring to the actual international border here, yet her analysis of the abject encompasses “the in between, the ambiguous, and the composite” of the functions and practices that the border engenders. (4) The border thus becomes a space of social death and the locus of physical death, the site of multiple encounters in which the migrant body is rendered abject and fungible.
Dispossession, what Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou describe as the processes and ideologies “by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and regulate the distribution of vulnerability; (2) is both a prerequisite and an outcome of the border, signifying the vast humanitarian effort we need to undertake to dismantle the scopic regimes that systemically undermine the humanity of the refugee populations.

I. The Refugee Movement in Pictures: Documenting Flight

The portrayal of the refugee movement and its affective pull on the audience need to be examined in conjunction with the means through which the history of the movement is being authored. When I first started my initial collection of photographs from international media venues to create a database of the movement’s trajectory, it was evident that the bulk of the work was disparaging to the refugee’s humanity even when these images were presented in support of their plight. These visual representations were compelling in that they were far more insidious than those, which openly aimed to undermine the humanity of the refugees due to their subjects’ lack of compliance with Eurocentric “aesthetic”. For instance, an example of imagery used to support anti-inclusion rhetoric would be a photograph taken from a distance, depicting a large crowd consisting solely of men, often engaging in intense dialogue, their eyes averted from the camera.
We’ve seen this type of image in multiple iterations across the trajectory of the refugee movement. This visual staging of threat would then be captioned to imply, the aggressiveness of the male non-European and thus non-white other, a subject oftentimes presented as expressing entitlement over rights exclusive to citizens of the EU.

In a similar vein, an image used to support the refugee struggle would feature women and children, again in various locations: as they are rescued from the sea, in hotspot reception centers, or out in the open, resting in the cold, helpless as they anticipate information about the status of the border in the next couple of days.
Finding imagery that was produced, disseminated, and curated by women in flight was almost impossible. When I finally located it, it was mediated through the lens of other feminist scholars doing groundwork as volunteers.

Imagery of women disseminated by the press exhibits a fascination with gender roles that is in turn indicative of the strategic layering of sentimental sympathy across hierarchical categories of respectability. As seen in the previous two images, the women depicted are validated in their roles as mothers and protectors of the young, while a distinct sartorial schema signifies their cultural placement. In spite of the fact that men who sport sartorial choices that confirm their otherness as non-European and Muslim, are perceived of as threats to European identity, women are predominantly depicted in non-Western attire, their clothing a testament of otherness which nonetheless presents them as less threatening, due to its perceived association
with qualities such as deference, subservience, and abidance by patriarchal and religious Islamic values.

Surely, given the demographic of the refugee movement, women partaking in it have religious and cultural affinities that condition their sartorial choices. However, the women of the refugee movement have access to non-ethnic clothing, both due to the distribution of donated clothing by the volunteers and NGOs, but also due to their own Westernized aesthetic. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the photographs disseminated by mainstream international media, even those who put women center stage in their mise-en-scene, tend to prefer photographed subjects whose sartorial aesthetics emphasize their religious affinity with Islam.
The rhetorical function of these images contributes to the strategy of othering often propelled by the effort to argue against the reception and inclusion of migrants within the EU. This reliance upon photography and the visual to evoke empathetic identification does not serve refugee reception in an ethical manner, as instead of making an argument for inclusion within European societal structures, it relegates the photographed subject to a sub par category than that occupied by the spectator-citizens who witness their flight.

To counter the rhetorical function of these depictions, I wanted to examine the ways in which the populations in flight document their own migratory experience, bearing witness to this unfolding crisis through the use of recording devices and possibly through the use of social media platforms. The technological apparatus and infrastructure, such as smart phones and wi-fi connection among other affordances of the digital age, makes this movement the first of its kind in terms of the recording and enunciating capacities at the hands of refugees. In the perilous
crossing of the Mediterranean a smart phone is for many their most treasured possession as they strive to reconnect with relatives or get information about the status of the border.

Several parameters affect the limited production and dissemination of stories depicting the trajectory of the refugee movement by the migrants. Refugees remain cautious to not attract attention given their curtailed legal status, while they are also reluctant to use their smart phones in public as those tend to incriminate them in the eyes of the often unwelcoming public. Smartphone possession and use is perceived as a sign of affluence, which in turn contributes to narratives of vilification targeting refugees. Indicative of an easily unsettled, fragile humanitarian imaginary, in which impoverishment and subordination are prerequisites for sentimental sympathy, these attacks against migrants reverberate with the exclusionary politics often employed by media to unfavorably portray the refugee movement. To think of social media platforms as trespassing representational boundaries might be too generous a reading for their democratic potential or the capabilities they algorithmically possess. The latest election, among other such manifestations, was a clear example of filter bubbles and echo chambers, as well as a testament to the limited capacity of the media to break through the perceptive clusters of the likeminded. However, an ethical engagement with imagery and narratives of the Syrian Refugee Crisis is important not only in terms of public discourse, but, crucially, because of the ways in which these depictions have considerable power in affecting policy.

Finding imagery that was produced, disseminated, and curated by refugees in flight, specifically by women, was almost impossible. I was hoping to examine the advent of auto-curatorial visual genres, which I envisaged displaced individuals using to broadcast their voices, and was hopeful for a space within social media platforms that fostered such an encounter. Until December 2016 all I was coming up with was documentary projects similar to *She is Syria,*
crowd-funding campaigns, or Humans of New York Refugee Edition, all commendable works, but simultaneously all mediated by the lens of other scholars, artists or activists doing groundwork as volunteers. This mediation inevitably affected the end result, often procuring a whitewashed,Europalatable product, leaving us wondering if there is an unmediated, unfiltered, visual genre of testimony that the migrants of the Refugee movement curate or possess.

During the winter as I was nearing the completion of my chapter, I contemplated our role as witnesses and ethical onlookers of this humanitarian disaster. Soon, videos from Aleppo started circulating on social medial platforms. As the city was brutally bombarded, citizens in the midst of ruins recorded themselves, talked of their political stance, lives, and genuine disbelief at the fact they were still alive amidst a war zone.
This radical collapse of the space between life and death, between the onlooker and the protagonist, and the offering of raw footage without sensationalized captions, reminded me of the etymology of witnessing in Greek. Μαρτυρέω; to bear witness is to be a martyr. When itinerant historians authored the narratives of the great Grecopersian wars, their involvement in the events unfolding afforded them the right to tell the story.

To conclude, given the precariousness of sympathetic identification that visual imagery engenders, it is critical to develop a vocabulary for the ocular functions that enable the processes of witnessing; a vocabulary that hopefully addresses the distinction between affect and sentimental sympathy, rather than blends them haphazardly in an emotive blur. This conflation between affect and sentimental sympathy, which fosters equally potent identificatory and exclusionary impulses, is one of the underlying reasons for the global rise of populism. Utilizing pathos as a rhetorical appeal, obscuring the ethical and logical dimensions of argumentation, yields perilous outcomes that compromise the dispersal of factual information, often turning the public sphere in an arena of widely circulated, and often unsubstantiated sentiments. In a representational sphere that is tethered to the enactment of precarious empathy and its subsequent objectification of the body in flight, I argue for the need to practice ethical witnessing and for the imperative to develop refugee auto-curatorial genres of visual testimony. Placing emphasis on the authorial agency of refugees and on their accounts of flight, would not only
articulate a more cogent narrative of the histories of the movement, but also a more egalitarian
type of global citizenship. The democratizing potential that such a representational shift would
genre could potentially provide an antidote to the rise of populism and decisively contribute
to a revised approached towards the exclusionary practices of international borders.
CONCLUSION

Critics of postcolonialism, critical race theory, and intersectionality have long argued for the crucial role subaltern and historically disenfranchised subjects play in undoing the white hegemonic logics of colonial archives. In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary women writers and visual artists of color compose an emancipatory counter archive of past and present dispossessions through affective storytelling. I argue that this archive is the product of an epistemological shift, which I trace in contemporary visual and textual genres including neo-slave narratives, poems, novels, graphic memoirs, portraiture, sculpture, documentary photography and a range of new media, such as blogs and social media platforms. This epistemological shift reflects how knowledge emerges from affect, understood as visceral feeling and sentience, rather than from cognitive processes that employ language and empathic identification to produce meaning.

Employing a transnational and hemispheric approach, I look at texts by Morrison (U.S), Philip (Canada), Jones (Brazil), Powell (Jamaica), Adichie (Nigeria), and Satrapi (Iran) and argue that these writers unsettle rigid classifications of genre, citizenship, and belonging, to resist the imperialist and racist discourses affixed to the colonial archive. To undo the structures historically complicit in their dispossession, these writers challenge the authority of the autonomous, liberal, archival subject, construed in accordance with exclusionary Enlightenment theories, in which reason and civil rights are only assigned to white males. To expose cognition and sentimental sympathy as the culprits behind asymmetries of belonging, they turn away from perilous forms of empathic identification, and instead utilize haptic, visual, and aural modes to immerse their audience in the sensate experience of the archive.
In their quest for egalitarian forms of archival subjectivity, which are not already pre-hierarchized as sub par to white hegemonic subject positions, the writers I examine forge an affective counter archive that has significant emancipatory potential. For instance, as I demonstrated in my first chapter, Morrison and Philip disrupt the colonial logic of language, and instead use sonic, aural, and haptic modes to immerse the reader in the terrain and soundscape of slavery. I argue that this epistemological shift from empathic identification to affect, in the form of sentience and visceral feeling, transforms the genre of the slave narrative and makes palpably present the afterlives of slavery in the fissures of the contemporary moment. This veering from 19th century sentimentalism to the visceralized sentience of contemporary neo-slave narratives suggests an emancipatory embodied relation with the texts.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how the reappropriation of emblematicity contributes to decolonizing efforts in *Corregidora* and *The Pagoda*. I argue that emblems have emancipatory potential since they elude cognitive processing due to our immediate and visceral response to them. In this way, the emblem, a visual genre under the control of white hegemonic culture, and one that has historically contributed to the oppression and dispossession of subjugated peoples through the proliferation of racial stereotypes, can become a tool to counter dispossession through metonymic reconfiguration. By rewiring the emblem, we can also hope to rewire coloniality, and therefore produce a new counter-archive by way of the sensate nature of emblems.

In Chapter Three, I show how an interlocking web of gazes, vertical and horizontal, enables critical engagement with blackness within the US and Nigerian contexts. I examine surveillance, sous-veillance, double consciousness, and respectability politics as ocular functions that subject blackness to a spectral analysis, and argue for the emancipatory potential that the
breakdown of such categories fosters. This counter-archive of the present, realized on a metatextual level through Adichie’s novel and Ifemelu’s blog posts, contributes important insights to the ways in which immigrant populations decipher their new terrains and identities through the visual. Specifically, when formerly sovereign, autonomous subjects, such as Ifemelu are a priori racially hierarchized upon their arrival in the United States, the visual storytelling of online platforms and the critical sousveillance of racial dynamics undo this racial logic by way of sentience and viscerality.

In my final chapter, I trace a genealogical engagement with seriality in narratives of women’s lives in flight in the Middle East, and argue that it plays a crucial role as method and mode of affect for the emergence of an emancipatory counter-archive. I demonstrate how seriality diffuses the perilous sentimental sympathy often prevalent in narratives of dispossession, and propose that it is through the evocation of suspense—viscerally experienced by the audience—that the liberating function of seriality in organizing experience emerges. Then I proceed to theorize an ethics of witnessing that resists the ways in which empathic identification perpetuates power hierarchies consistent with imperialist white hegemonic logic. Western documentary photography and sentimental identification are co-extensive with western imperialism, the western gaze, and the colonial archive. To counter the ways in which white hegemonic privilege imposes hierarchies of livable and grievable, I propose the critical development of a vocabulary for the ocular functions that enable the processes of witnessing; a vocabulary that hopefully addresses the distinctions between sentimental sympathy and sentience.
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