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Publication Date

2024

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Visualizing the *Wake*: A Black Feminist Grammar
for Visual Dissent in the African Diaspora

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Zama Dube

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Visualizing the *Wake*: A Black Feminist Grammar
for Visual Dissent in the African Diaspora

by

Zama Dube

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Shelleen Maisha Greene, Chair

Due to the awareness of how visual technologies have historically functioned as hostile and violent forces that render Blackness as aberration, this dissertation pays special focus to the creative practices of Black women and queer image-makers who are invested in decolonizing the ways in which we *see*. Through a careful examination of films and photography that spans from South Africa, and across the African diaspora, this dissertation is able to explore the edgeless connections between slavery and colonialism as ongoing histories that continue to rupture contemporary Black visual cultures.

By orientating towards Black feminisms and queer theories to examine film and photography, this project inaugurates an interdisciplinary avenue that is able to reveal how the field of vision has continued to make marginal assessments on the compounding intersections

between race, gender and sexuality. To further decolonize the process of knowledge production, this project recognizes the creative work of image-making, as an aesthetic practice that theorizes in its doing. Thus, I further draw from my positionality as a media practitioner and the experiential knowledge I have garnered in order to offer a methodological intervention that centers Black feminist creative praxis.

As a prevailing enquiry in each chapter of this project, I interrogate how Black women and queer image-makers subvert the use of the camera as an institutional apparatus and technology of capture. In an anti-Black visual culture that is often calibrated by abject representations of Black women and queer identities, I believe that there is something bold and subversive about positioning Black women's visual productions as constituting counter-hegemonic historiographies and archival repositories. Thus, I consider that due to the institutional neglect and erasure of Black women in hegemonic visual history, a decolonial approach to scholarship ought to contend with questions of materiality to contemplate the role played by Black film and queer photography in producing narratives that are able to collapse colonial framings of history and archive. Therefore, I postulate that the films and photography examined in this dissertation, serve as revolutionary and decolonial visual archives of an *otherwise* due to the ways in which the hegemonic visual histories are challenged and subsequently refused.

The dissertation of Zama Dube is approved.

Amy Villarejo

Aymar Jean Christian

Veronica Andrea Paredes

Shelleen Maisha Greene, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Dedicated in loving memory of my late grandmother, Norah Nomthandazo Dube. Gogo, your spirit has propelled me towards the pursuit of an insurgent Black intellectual life. Whilst you were subjected to a life of servitude as a domestic worker, I witnessed your daily acts of Black feminist refusal as you were audacious enough to practice freedom in your kitchen. You remain to be one of the most revolutionary theorists I have encountered in this life and the many other realms you now occupy. Your teachings on *umsamo* and the wisdom of our ancestors were my first induction on decoloniality and liberatory Black aesthetics. Thus, you have always been a
race for theory.

For my mother, Sizakele Lorraine Dube. You are my everything and words will never be enough for a love this big. Thank you for everything. None of this work would have been made possible without your unconditional love and support. *Siyabuya kude, Nzwakele.*

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VITA

EDUCATION

Candidate in Philosophy, Film & Television (ABD)	2024
<i>High Pass in Decolonial Visual Studies</i>	
M.A. University of the Witwatersrand, African Literature, Language and Media	2015
B. A.H University of the Witwatersrand, Law, Politics & African Literature	2012

PUBLICATIONS

(Forthcoming) Article, “Blackness as Oceanic Vastness: Mapping Black Feminist Aesthetics in African Diasporic Films” for *Black Camera*.

AWARDS, FELLOWSHIPS & HONORS

Ralph Bunche Predoctoral Fellowship, UCLA	2022-2023
Inaugural fellow for the Marty Sklar Entertainment Innovation Fellowship, UCLA	2021-2022
Teshome Gabriel Memorial Award, UCLA	2020 & 2021
The UCLA Center For the Study of Women Travel Grant, UCLA	2020
Mariame Kaba Graduate Fellowship in Black Feminist Research, UCLA	2020
Edward A. Bouchet Graduate Honor Society, UCLA	2020
Army Archerd Fellowship in Theater, Film and Television, UCLA	2019
Irma Polaski Award, UCLA	2019
Postgraduate Masters Merit Award, University of the Witwatersrand	2012
Postgraduate Honors Merit Award, University of the Witwatersrand	2011
Golden Key Honor Society, University of the Witwatersrand	2011
Certificate of Merit in <i>Popular Media in Africa</i> , University of the Witwatersrand	2010
Certificate of Merit in <i>Literatures of the Black Diaspora</i> , University of the Witwatersrand	2010
Certificate of Merit in <i>East African Fiction</i> , University of the Witwatersrand	2010
Certificate of Merit in <i>Gender and Writing</i> , University of the Witwatersrand	2010
Certificate of Merit, <i>Contemporary Trends in African Literature</i> , WITS University	2010
Certificate of First Class, <i>Feminist Theory & Politics II</i> , University of the Witwatersrand	2009

CONFERENCE PAPERS & PRESENTATIONS

“Visualizing the Wake: Sarah Maldoror as Cinematic Griot and Decolonial Archivist”. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)*. Boston, Massachusetts. March 2024.

“Visualizing Herstories: Mapping Cinematic Representations of Black Feminist Movements in the African Diaspora.” *philoSOPHIA: Transnational Feminist Praxis & Philosophical Interventions*. UNC Charlotte. June 2023.

“Visualizing Herstories: Mapping Cinematic Representations of Black Feminist Movements in the African Diaspora.” *Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)*. Denver, Colorado. April 2023.

“Blackness as Oceanic Vastness: Mapping Black Feminist Aesthetics in the African Diaspora”. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies*. April 2022.

“Envisioning a Decolonial Visual Representation of Black womanhood: Gender, Identity, Performance and Representation”. *International Conference on Gender Studies in Africa*. Makerere University: School of Women and Gender Studies. Uganda. February 2022.

“Wakanda Forever?: Deconstructing the Aesthetic Contract as Liberatory Practice”. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)*. March 2021

Introduction

Due to the imposition of colonial histories and its afterlives, Black people emerge as colonized subjects who have been subjected to a series of emotional and expressive modalities that are inextricably tied to the proximity of the white gaze¹. Such monstrous intimacies² in the contemporary moment, necessitate a study of visual practitioners' affiliations with the nexus of decolonized race and gender representations. Working with such stakes in mind, the objective of this project seeks to examine the visual productions of Black women and queer artists whom I identify as playing decisive roles in reimagining marginal histories through their articulation of Black feminist aesthetics. Thus, if we are to consider the realm of visual arts as a space that has been “westernized³” through an intentional lack of attention to alternative possibilities, then it is an appropriate response to consider the ways in which Black women and queer artists contend with these gendered and racialized visual histories in order to produce subversive images of Blackness. By privileging the works of Black women and queer visual artists, I argue for their visual practices as being preoccupied with the articulation of a liberatory and effectively decolonial⁴ Black feminist aesthetic. Therefore, I am invested in the potentiality of what I observe as the forms of *refusal*⁵ that are enacted through subversive visual practices in the African diaspora.

¹ See Read, Alan. *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. London: Bay Press, 1996.

² This is a framework offered by Christina Sharpe in *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). In this text she seeks to configure how slave and colonial violence continue to shape Black subjectivities.

³ I deploy the term westernized here as a placement holder for hegemonic ideology.

⁴ See Walter D. Mignolo 2011.

⁵ I adopt the notion of refusal from Black feminist scholar Tina Campt in her article: “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal”. *Social Text*. Vol. 37 (3):2019, p. 25. I deploy this concept in order to ascertain the ways in which the image-makers in this project contend with and refuse the terms imposed by the hegemonic aesthetic contract that binds Blackness to negation. Thus, to practice refusal is to reject “the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented and to embrace the possibility of living otherwise,” 25.

I position this project as a Black feminist intervention in the fields of Visual Studies and the broader field of Cinema and Media Studies. In thinking through the connections between Black politics, feminist politics and queer politics as fundamentally invested in a similar liberatory project, I postulate that such a project is one that calls for the radical reimagining of Black visual histories. Thus, I find it important to confer value to assessing the visual and cinematic practices of Black women and queer artists as this becomes a form of redress in response to a long history that has insistently subjugated these identities to abject visual representations. By centering the visual practices of Black women artists in the theorization of a decolonial Black aesthetic, I am ultimately challenging discourse that has continuously erased Black feminist creative and intellectual contributions. In this regard, I am also working in concert with a lineage in Black feminist thought that is of the idea that “Black people, particularly those who inhabit the global south, have always theorized-but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic”⁶. As such, the visual artists that are examined in this dissertation project are conceived as having always been “a race for theory”⁷ that disrupts exclusionary academic sanctuaries. What I mean by this is that the visual grammar that is constructed by the chosen artists is able to perform the same function as academic theory, through creative praxis.

In grappling with various concepts of decoloniality, I also intend to draw from my positionality as a media practitioner and the experiential knowledge I have garnered through my years of working in the South African broadcast industry and my current practice as a community radio DJ and sound-artist based in Los Angeles. As a scholar and an artist who is invested in Black feminist praxis, I draw from every facet of my lived experiences as a source and resource for

⁶ Barbara Christian. 1988. “The Race for Theory”. *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1: p. 68

⁷ Ibid.

theorizing my feminism. By doing so, my hope is to articulate the importance of Black women's self-articulation in challenging colonized forms of visual medias and art. Therefore, by placing Black women and queer creatives at the center of this research, I shall explore the ways that these artists are using their art and subjectivity as a form of resisting systemic erasure.

Like most studies on Black visual culture, I cite the "Fanonian Moment"⁸ as a point of entry. However, I do this with the critical awareness that missing in Fanon's race/gender configuration is the queer and the Black woman. Therefore, I find Muñoz⁹ to be incredibly generative not only in providing me with a conceptual framework to work with, but he also offers guidance for how Black feminist and queer scholars can resist the surreptitious violence of erasure that is often produced by canonical texts. Exposing the ease with which most foundational theorists were able to reify heteropatriarchy and homophobia, Muñoz cites Fanon's overt dismissal of queerness in his anti-colonial discourse. Perhaps what is most generative in this part of Muñoz's analysis is that he offers *disidentification* as a framework that would enable us to interrogate Fanon's homophobia and misogyny while still engaging with his anti-colonial discourse as valuable¹⁰. I found this intervention rather liberating for my own scholarly practice, as I am often left to contend with Fanon's ideas even as I attempt to map out a project that is consciously Black feminist and queer in thought. In addition, I also draw from Nicole Fleetwood's Black feminist revision of the Fanonian moment, which she uses as a point of departure to map out her own theoretical interventions in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*. I provide greater context for this in my literature review section.

⁸ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recalls his experience of epidermalization where the white gaze fixes him as an object among objects.

⁹ See José Esteban, Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Since this dissertation project is invested in Black feminist visual grammars that allow us to imagine otherwise, I have chosen to engage the work of artists who seek to move us beyond Black negation. This becomes particularly important in exceeding afro-pessimistic frameworks that often discount the liberatory potential of the Black imagination. Furthermore, as an extension of my own ideological investment in global Blackness, I have decided to engage a myriad of Black artists who inhabit different parts of the African diaspora in order to foster a more robust consideration of Black visual aesthetics. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that contemporary debates on representation and Black visual culture belong to a larger genealogy that extends beyond the imperious west and throughout the African diaspora. Whist I gesture towards the use of diaspora, it is important to state that my engagement with the term is not an attempt to simply purport for an essentialist framework that is rooted in ideas of a flattening “sameness” and the marking of some kind of abstract “return”¹¹. Instead, I am enacting a politic that is deeply invested in “tracking the transnational contours of Black expression”¹².

Through my years of experience as a media practitioner, I have been able to observe and experientially contend with the ideological and political stakes that are determined by how Black identities are rendered by visual medias. Thus, the research questions posed in this project vacillate between Black feminist theoretical interventions and the practices of visual dissent enacted by the chosen artists. Consequently, I attentively engage the frameworks and methods postulated by Black feminist and queer scholars in order to grapple with the decolonial potential of Black feminist thought as a means of intervening within the methods and frameworks established in the field of vision. By drawing on these scholars primarily, I highlight the importance of

¹¹ Brent Hayes, Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹² Ibid, 3.

interdisciplinarity as a form of methodology and a demonstration of the limiting and “colonizing” effects of burdening a singular discipline with the task to adequately account for how multiple disciplinary formations reify Blackness.

In order to critically attend to how Black women and queer artists enact visual dissent, this project leads with an enquiry into how the chosen image-makers engage history in order to enact and portray decolonial visual inventions of Black being. Furthermore, the study probes that we consider the realm of Black music as a generative register for the articulation of a decolonial and Black feminist aesthetic. This is particularly brought to bear in the first chapter of the dissertation, by interrogating the filmic works of Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror and their use of jazz music as an archival repository for diasporic Black visual histories of dissent. As a prevailing enquiry in each chapter of this project, I interrogate: “how are Black women and queer image-makers subverting the use of institutional apparatuses (e.g. the camera lens, the gallery space etc.) or what Tina Campt defines as “technologies of capture”¹³? Finally, I initiate each chapter’s intervention through a question that seeks to grapple with the types of *futuristic* possibilities that are offered by Black and queer feminisms in the visual reconstruction of a liberatory/decolonial aesthetic. Drawing from Black feminist and queer conceptions of temporality, I define futurity through an emblem of the *otherwise* which is to say, that in order for us to dream and envision a future that is decolonial and effectively liberatory, we ought to imagine otherwise. Thus, I postulate that each of the examined image-makers constitute a Black feminist visual grammar of the otherwise.

Since this dissertation contends with how Black women image-makers are able to transmute the violence of Black visual histories, it becomes important to articulate a framework that is able to escape and transcend Black death. Thus, I lean into the theoretical teachings inscribed

¹³ This is a term that Tina Campt makes continuous reference to in her text: *Listening to Images*. (Durham: Duke University Press), 2017.

in *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*—where Kevin Quashie rigorously and with much tenderness engages Black creative texts that frame Blackness as a state of aliveness, capaciousness, and possibility¹⁴. Through his engagement of Black feminist literary productions Quashie is able to demonstrate how the Black imagination functions to inaugurate radical world-making and possibility—an *otherwise* where Blackness is always already marked by aliveness. Underpinning the logics of queerness and Black feminist futurity is the idea that the present is never enough. It is in dreaming of the future and building the possibilities of an *elsewhere* and *otherwise* that queer futurity and freedom are envisioned¹⁵. Thus, in this dissertation project, I will conflate the terms *elsewhere* and *otherwise* as a way to signal and gesture us towards this queer Black feminist futurity.

By advocating for a politics of the otherwise, I am rejecting Black negation and enacting a form of Black aliveness that “is a world of heterogeneity whose only cohering value is the rightness of [B]lack being, the possibility of [B]lack becoming”¹⁶. The visual texts that are centered in this dissertation can be said to perform a similar function in that each image-maker is enacting subversive creative strategies that produce radical liberatory potentialities for how we can envision Black being. In an anti-Black visual culture where we are often subjected to abject representations of Blackness, I believe that there is something bold and subversive about positioning Black women’s visual projections as counter-hegemonic forms of historiographies and archival

¹⁴ Kevin Everod, Quashie. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

¹⁵ See José Esteban, Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Saidiya V Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019) and Tina M, Camp. *Listening to Images*. 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Kevin Everod, Quashie. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 7.

repositories. Thus, what I hope to crystallize at the end of each chapter is that the creative practice of imagining otherwise is indeed a form of decolonial praxis.

Since this project grapples with the necessity to decolonize and subvert hegemonic understandings of history—I consider that due to the institutional neglect and erasure of Black women in hegemonic visual history, a decolonial approach to scholarship ought to contend with questions of materiality in order to contemplate the role played by film and photography in producing narratives that are able to collapse colonial framings of historiography and archive which often privilege tangible records and abstracted sites of collection. Black feminist historiographies and epistemologies such as Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation”, Christina Sharpe’s “wake” and Simone Browne’s reinterpretation of the panopticon will be critical in this dissertation’s articulation of counter-histories. These theoretical frameworks and their respective literatures will be comprehensively reviewed and analyzed in the chapters to follow, to provide better clarity and context for how they are applicable to the image-makers that are explored in this dissertation.

What I hope to crystallize is that Black feminist theories and praxis become critical touchstones for envisioning and enacting decoloniality. Thus, in order to posit a decolonial approach towards knowledge production, it becomes crucial that I center the voices of the chosen visual artists in the process of theorizing. Clearly put, in order to disentangle from methods that often alienate the very voice of its subject, I lean into media studies methodologies that consult media para-texts in the form of press interviews. In utilizing my own experiences as a media practitioner, I am able to analyze the interviews from an intersectional and subjective position in order to develop nuanced findings. I find this to be a well-suited method to addressing the tension between a push for objective neutrality in reporting academic research and a pull to produce grounded research that engages with the holistic experiences of its participants. Furthermore, my

positionality as a scholar who has an active creative practice is incredibly generative as I am able to theorize from experiential knowledge. The value of research that is driven by this unique positionality is that it generates multi-layered interpretations of the visual texts in question.

I have been able to demonstrate this method on creative scholarship through my online radio show entitled, [The Witch's Flight; In Search of the Black Femme in Amapiano](#). This is a name adapted from Kara Keeling's text, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*¹⁷. Before I expand on how Keeling's conception of "The Black femme" inaugurates and animates my approach towards creative scholarship, I would like to offer a brief overview of the preoccupations that frame my media project. Using the radio as a decolonial site for practicing the *otherwise*, I produce a monthly two-hour segment of artist interviews and DJ mixes that pull primarily from deep house music and *amapiano*¹⁸. I also draw from my theoretical training as an interdisciplinary scholar in order to produce and edit interviews with an array of artists who share a similar vision and passion for decoloniality, global Blackness and an ethical approach to art-making. To this end, I am able to demonstrate my creative practice as a sound and voice-over artist.

Merging theories of the Black aesthetic and experimental approach to archival practice, I position my radio show as a decolonial site for enacting radical creative possibilities— as I conjure sonic interpretations of visual art, theories and diverse forms of cultural production. I position the *Black femme* in amapiano as an extension of my own Black feminist sensibility. Often, the genre and overall commercial media landscape overlooks the contributions of Black women and queer

¹⁷ Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Amapiano, is a Nguni word which loosely translates to the English term "the pianos". It is a subgenre of house music that emerged in South Africa in the mid-2010s and is a hybrid of deep house, jazz, and lounge music characterized by synths and wide percussive basslines.

people whom I see as being integral in cultural production. Music is at the heart of the show as I perceive it to be an artifact that has been able to sustain and preserve the nonmaterial aspects of African culture in spite of coloniality and various forms of Black capture and displacement.

What fuels the show is my genuine love and curiosity for Black expressive cultures spanning across the African diaspora. Perhaps what I would deem as the most salient characteristic of my media praxis, is that it serves as a form of archival work— a form of Black feminist excavation labor. Often, the creative productions of Black youth (particularly) are seen as fleeting and at worst, not worth serious scholarly consideration. *Amapiano* as a music genre and lifestyle originating from South African townships, is fast becoming a global phenomenon— yet with the speed at which the movement is growing, I observe a paucity in scholarship and cultural productions that are invested in accurately documenting and archiving the movement as it unfolds in real time.

As a scholar and thinker who is constantly grappling with ideas of diaspora, visual culture and decoloniality, I have found my practice as a mix amapiano DJ to be incredibly generative as I have been able to encounter some of the ways that the music does perform an interesting and radical function for imagining the *otherwise*. As a testament to how this creative media praxis serves as a form of erasure resistance and a queer archival practice, I take direction from the words of Daphne A. Brooks who saliently asserts; “We know the meaning of our seeming valuelessness, of being “forgotten but not gone,” and yet our masterful rejoinder has always been to build our own monuments by using “wave[s] of sound...”¹⁹ Thus, *The Witch’s Flight* in itself becomes a public exegesis on the significance of Black creative and cultural production as a form of rewriting

¹⁹ See more in the chapter entitled: “SLOW FADE TO BLACK”: Black Women Archivists Remix the Sounds from Daphne A. Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021).

and recontextualizing histories that render Blackness as aberration and obscurity. “It is a show that amounts to nothing less than a Black feminist emancipation project, a communal meditation on the crisis of “the fade.”²⁰

In this part of my discussion, I would like to provide clarity to the ways in which I pull from Keeling’s conception of the Black femme to inaugurate my own media praxis. Similarly, to Keeling, I position the figure of the Black femme as a site for Black liberatory potential in that she is a figure that “exists on the edge of the visible and the invisible, serving as a portal through which present (im)possibilities might appear”²¹. Since this project centers the creative and intellectual productions of Black women, I perceive my own creative media praxis as a work that performs potential liberatory *flight*. I draw from Keeling’s work not so much as a theoretical framework but instead as creative poetics to bolster and position my media praxis as already being encoded with strategies that subvert gendered and racialized conceptions of “artist”, “theorist” and “cultural producer”.

Keeling adopts the concept of the “cinematic” from Deleuze and theorizes that common sense can be understood as, “a collective set of memory-images available for memory to direct onto a perception carved out according to a collective motor habituation”²². She notes that whilst cinema and its processes has had a profound effect on anti-capitalist Black liberation movements based in the United States, it has simultaneously created structures that perpetuate racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Through an examination of the image and representation of the *Black*

²⁰ Daphne A, Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 370.

²¹ Keeling, Kara. *The Witch’s Flight: the Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. (Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

²²Kara Keeling. *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.

femme—a figure who exists on the edge line between the visible and the invisible—Keeling contends that when the Black femme is rendered visible, her appearance is able to subvert structures of hegemonic cinema. Thus, the Black femme becomes a figure who carries emancipatory potential through the ways in which her image challenges conceptions of Blackness, gender, and sexuality in hegemonic visual culture²³.

Moreover, I invoke Keeling to position the dissertations image-makers who offer a Black feminist and decolonial aesthetic to the field of vision. This decolonial aesthetic ultimately challenges the “common sense” image—as theorized by Gilles Deleuze—of “the Black” and the cinematic representation of the Black as a “problem”. Thus, I offer the visual texts explored in this dissertation as providing both creative and theoretical interventions in order to produce a visual grammar rooted in liberatory Black feminist aesthetics.

This dissertation is organized into three chapters. In Chapter one of this dissertation, I consider the decolonial aesthetics of filmmakers: Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror. To offer a diasporic Black feminist intervention in the field of vision, I position Maldoror and Dash as diasporic interlocutors. Whilst scholars have examined the works of these filmmakers individually, there is yet to be a study that positions Maldoror and Dash as contemporaries and interlocutors involved in a diasporic “call and response”. To provide a corrective to this, chapter one provides a careful examination of the films *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and *Léon G. Damas* (1995) to frame the aesthetic practices of Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror as being Black expressive forms already encoded with strategies of creative resistance to hegemonic cinemas.

²³ Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1-2.

Through an intimate meditation on these filmic works, I illuminate how Black women filmmakers can tap into the affective registers of jazz music in order to enact a genre of Black visuality that is boundless and one that escapes colonial capture. Dash and Maldoror are working against violent visual histories thereby in pulling from jazz music they are able to access diasporic memory as a narrative structure and a form of archival repository of counter-hegemonic aesthetics. By privileging the use of music and the sonic landscape in the works of Maldoror and Dash, I offer a radical account of filmic histories that are preoccupied with the articulation of a decolonial Black aesthetic. Contending for what artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa identifies as Black film's ability to "transmit the power, beauty and alienation embedded within Black music"²⁴.

In Chapter Two, I consider the ways in which cinematic representations of Black women's activism constitute as counter-historiographies. I contend that in the paradigm of South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement, historical accounts continue to center heteropatriarchal figures whilst simultaneously erasing the fundamental role played by Black women. Thus, as a counter-strategy to this, I offer an intimate meditation on Xoliswa Sithole's film entitled, *Standing on their Shoulders* (2018). Through the form of interviews, living testimonies and powerful archival footage, *Standing on their Shoulders* weaves a story of the women who fought for change in apartheid South Africa thus reconstructing the corrosive legacies of colonial governance.

Thus, I postulate that the chosen film serves as a revolutionary and decolonial visual archive due to the ways in which the normative apartheid histories of Black resistance are challenged and subsequently refused. By privileging the cinematic gaze of a Black woman filmmaker, this chapter echoes the prevailing thematic concerns of the entire dissertation project

²⁴ See Calvin Tomkin's article in the New Yorker entitled: *Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation*. Dec 14. 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/12/21/arthur-jafas-radical-alienation>

which are ultimately preoccupied with the articulation of a liberatory and decolonial Black feminist aesthetic.

Finally, in chapter three I position the self-portraiture photography of South African artist, Zanele Muholi, as a form of queer archive and the visual enactment of the *otherwise*. Through a careful consideration of the subversive creative strategies deployed in their black and white self-portrait series: *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I contend that Muholi's form of archiving becomes a practice of visual dissent and insurgent world-building. In order to provide greater theoretical context for how I position the interventions made in each chapter, I shall now transition into a review of the literature that informs this dissertation.

Literature Review: Black Feminist and Queer Approaches to Visual Studies

In this part of my project, I seek to attentively grapple with the decolonial potential of Black feminist thought as a means of intervening within the debates established in the field of Visual Studies. Much of the literature that has sought to obliterate the racialized formations of the dominant visual field often departs from the *Fanonian Moment*. This Fanonian anecdote explains his experience of *epidermalization*²⁵ after a white child responds to the sight of him by proclaiming; “Look, A Negro!”²⁶. Making an important Black feminist intervention and reinterpretation of this “canonized” anecdote is Nicole Fleetwood's text— *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*.

²⁵ Scholars within Black visual studies who cite Fanon's concept of epidermalization as noted in this project include Stuart Hall (1996), Nicole Fleetwood (2011) Simone Browne (2015). These scholars describe epidermalization as the imposition of race on the body.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon and Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin, White Masks/ Frantz Fanon: Translated by Charles Lam Markmann*. 1st Evergreen Black Cat ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 82

In her analysis, Fleetwood explains that “Fanon signals, for many contemporary scholars, a mode of articulating the space where the Black visual subject becomes intelligible through dominant discourse”²⁷. I argue that what distinguishes Fleetwood’s engagement of the Fanonian Moment in contrast to her interlocutors is that she justly points out how the continued rehearsal of this anecdote works to uphold phallogentric discourses in the field. A clearer way of stating this is by asserting that Nicole Fleetwood’s revision of the *Fanonian Moment* illustrates that what was merely one man’s affective response to epidermalization has now been exalted and ordained as a fact of theory.

Building on the critical work around representation that has been developed by scholars such as Herman Gray, Valarie Smith and Wahneema Lubiano, Fleetwood is aware to disrupt the expectation that Black representation ought to resolve the problem of the Black body in the field of vision. It is from this vantage point that *Troubling Vision* is able to build an argument for the visible Black body as a troubling figuration to visual discourse. I argue that Fleetwood’s notion of non-iconicity makes for a compelling conceptual framework in that it undoes and unsettles Black iconicity’s focus on the singularity of the image which often results in the complexity of Black lived experiences and discourses of race being obliterated. Elucidating this this point, Fleetwood asserts that:

“Visual representations of Blacks are meant to substitute for the real experiences of Black subjects. The visual manifestations of Blackness through technological apparatus or through a material experience of locating Blackness in public space

²⁷ Nicole R, Fleetwood *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 22.

equates with an ontological account of Black subjects. Visuality, and vision to an extent, in relationship to race becomes a thing unto itself²⁸.

Thus, what is at stake here is what I observe as the limits of representation politics because upon closer interrogation, one begins to observe that representational politics often work as a pacifier that cannibalizes off our trauma informed need to be seen and affirmed by those who hate us. Whilst we cannot and should not have representation bear the weight of Black liberation, similarly to Fleetwood, I do however believe that visual representation still matters. Hollywood's cooption of the slogan "representation matters"²⁹ is a testament to the lasting cultural impact and affective power rendered by Black visual representation.

To transcend fixed notions of identity categories, Fleetwood draws from performance studies and feminist theories of performativity and visibility in order to develop the conceptual framework, *excess flesh*. This is a framework I find myself most attracted to in helping me to grapple with my own project's concerns around the problematics of representation politics. In the attempt to lessen the liberatory load on her framework of excess flesh, Fleetwood clarifies that the framework is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. Instead, she proposes that we understand *excess flesh* as a performative that doubles visibility in order to reveal the visual codes at work on the (hyper)visible body that serves as its object.

²⁸ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

²⁹ In an unpublished seminar essay entitled: *The Function of the Black Female Author in Reimagining the Representations of Black womanhood in Hollywood*, I examine the role of the Black woman auteur in reconfiguring visual representations of Blackness in Hollywood. I situate my argument in response to observing how Hollywood, in recent years, has performed the optics of diversity and equity in its attempt to be perceived as an agent of inclusivity. Through the lens of Black feminist thought, I specifically examine the author function of Shonda Rhimes in contrast to Ava DuVernay and how their proximity to mainstream media renders them as both transgressors and participants in the struggle for hegemony.

Thus, in my project's provocation for Black women's subversive practices, I deploy *excess flesh* with the full awareness and discomfort that it has little effect on the dominant gaze and its visibility scheme. Instead, excess flesh serves as a map and atlas that helps me formulate an understanding for how Black woman visual artists are able to refract and reframe the dominant "gaze". Thus, to enact excess flesh is to refuse the binary of negative and positive representation. The Black body has been defined by Black feminist scholars as being systematically overdetermined and mythically configured thus perpetuating the burden of spectacular. Following in this theoretical lineage, Fleetwood takes on the intellectual task of further complicating debates around Black visual representation. As such, she offers an array of demonstrations that seek to elucidate the ways in which Black women visual artists enact hypervisibility as a strategy that moves beyond frameworks that understand it as a totalizing negation.

Fleetwood develops a compelling concept which she frames as "spectacular Blackness" that seeks to address the tensions produced by centering Black iconography in Black visual histories. I find this framework extremely generative as a demonstration of how Black feminist thought intervenes to decolonize and thus undo dominant ideologies on visibility and representation. Spectacular Blackness as a concept is critical of the reliance on Black iconography which often entraps Blackness within the binary codes of being rendered as either invisible or hyper-visible. What Fleetwood is able to circumscribe here is that by persistently rehearsing narratives based on singularity and "exceptional" moments in the visual history of Blackness, the icon functions as a fixed image that holds no space for nuance nor interiority.

I reference the above to illustrate what I identify as Black feminism's audacious refusal of an attachment to the spectacular. What I mean by this is that similarly to Tina Campt's turn towards a visual practice of *listening* to historical Black images (as I shall develop in later pages),

Fleetwood enacts a Black feminist care ethic which abandons the “theoretically interesting³⁰” for what has been rendered invisible about the quotidian. In true Black diasporic practice, I deem it necessary to place these scholars in concert with South African scholar Njabulo Ndebele who similarly urges Black storytellers to focus on interiority through a call for the “rediscovery of the ordinary”³¹. What I am demonstrating here is that the contemporary debates on representation and Black visual culture furthered by western scholars are in fact not new, however they belong to a larger genealogy that extends throughout the Black diaspora.

As demonstrated in extensive detail in the studies undertaken by the chosen Black feminist scholars, visual technologies have historically functioned as hostile and violent forces that render Blackness as aberration. Taking heed to the aforementioned critical interventions, this part of my response would like to now turn its focus to the theoretical interventions offered by Simone Browne in her study entitled *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*³². Here, Browne builds on Fanon’s lectures on surveillance in order to explore themes of escape and Blackness. Deploying the Fanonian concept of epidermalization, Browne’s study immediately announces itself as a part of a genealogy in Black visual studies, whereby race is conceived as a social fact imposed on Black life. Browne’s project poignantly examines the ways in which image-based technologies have long been calibrated to favor lightness and whiteness.

I specifically choose Simone Browne’s theoretical intervention in the repertoire of Black feminist scholars who work to make Blackness legible within the field of vision in order to

³⁰ African scholar, Keguro Macharia points our awareness to the ways in which scholars can often get stuck on Black negation under the guise of that which is deemed “theoretically interesting”. For greater context, consult Macharia’s article entitled: “black (beyond negation)” in *The New Inquiry*. May 26, 2018.

³¹ Njabulo S. Ndebele. “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 12 (2): 1986: 143–57.

³² Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

demonstrate how her study works to locate Blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated and enacted. Browne conceptualizes surveillance out of a critical reinterpretation of “oversight” as a notion that often haunts visual studies. I find Browne’s study as incredibly generative for its careful consideration of how racism and anti-Blackness continue to undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order. Working against the grain of white canonical violence, Browne postulates a critical interposition that looks towards the hold of the ship as a place of formation for the surveilling white gaze.

Here, I turn to Browne as a site for helping frame the liberatory potential embedded in flight and escape. This is an idea that functions within a logic that asks us to understand the ship, not merely as a place of capture but also as a document of Black escape and flight. Another critical intervention posed by Browne seeks to highlight the limits of Foucault’s Panopticon which has often been used to account for the disciplinary gaze as the archetypical power of modernity³³. In this enactment of decolonial praxis, Browne complicates the panopticon through a reading of the slave ship. In order to clearly elucidate the stakes that Browne’s interpretation open up, it is worth noting that in recent debates, the panopticon has in fact been a site of contestation for scholars who work within the vast rubric of visibility. Some scholars have criticized what they see as an over-reliance on the panopticon in surveillance studies, which they believe exaggerates the importance of visibility. Working within the tensions posed by the framework, Browne dispels the relevance of the panopticon model based on its limitations in helping us understand social media viewing practices whereby the subject is the one who enacts rituals of self-surveillance.

By shifting towards the middle passage and the ship as a site that has shaped and informed contemporary looking relations, Browne draws on Black feminist thought to conceptualize

³³ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 24.

enactments of Black visual refusal through what she terms as “Black looks”³⁴. Here, my hope is to deploy the framework as one that revitalizes bell hooks’ conception of the “oppositional gaze”³⁵. Furthermore, positioning Browne in queer of color critique, I argue that her critical reinterpretation of Foucault demonstrates what Muñoz refers to as disidentification. My assessment of this decolonial praxis actually proves to me as a scholar of the visual field that current frameworks and epistemologies that seek to theorize on “looking” relations are in fact porous and insufficient in helping us to understand the specificity of the “Black visual problem” as it comes to be known throughout the Black diaspora. In this light, I use Browne as a jump-off start to posit that the edgeless connections between slavery and colonialism be understood as ongoing histories that continue to rupture contemporary visual imaginations of Blackness. Whilst Browne requests that we turn towards the slave ship to make sense of the Black visual problem that marks the New World, I contend that the Black visual problem as we have come to know it, needs to be analyzed through the intersections of both colonial and slave capture. Essentially, I argue that the process of reinterpretation that is initiated by Browne’s reconfiguration of the panopticon needs to extend beyond the middle passage and the ship.

To expound on how Browne *disidentifies* with Foucault’s canonized version of visual history, I draw from José Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In this text Muñoz inaugurates his argument by bringing awareness to a fact that continues to reverberate in the contemporary moment and that is: queer theory’s continued treatment of race as an addendum. Such critical awareness is what has inspired me to look towards a range of disciplines to critically attend to the specific ways that Black queerness is both performed and

³⁴ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 24.

³⁵ See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

represented in mainstream visual medias. By drawing from Muñoz, I grapple with disidentification “as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance”³⁶. Here, Muñoz recognizes the creative work of performance, as an aesthetic practice that theorizes in its doing. This is an idea that is particularly appealing to me since my research is preoccupied with actively grappling with various ideas of decoloniality.

Thus, as I shall demonstrate in chapter three, I read the Black queer performances in Zanele Muholi’s photography as a form of theorizing without words and therefore a form of decolonial praxis. Muñoz uses a range of performances by queers of color to demonstrate how the audience can envision a place where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are portrayed in more nuanced and complex ways. Drawing from camp and drag culture, television, pornography, and more, Muñoz looks to the ways that queer people of color reconstruct and code cultural messages. Thus, the artistic performances examined by Muñoz are perceived as enabling the “minoritarian subject” a historical position and a sense of social agency. Often in the attempt to represent oppressed identities, cultural workers often fall into the trap of producing essentialized understandings of identity. Thus, in contending with this predicament in my own dissertation project, I consult Muñoz’s concept of disidentification as one that is generative.

Muñoz offers disidentification as a framework to help elucidate how minoritarian politics are mediated when one is working to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identities. To articulate this more effectively, Muñoz proposes disidentification as a framework that would help us understand how racially predicated and deviantly gendered identities negotiate representation. Since my dissertation is specifically contending with the visual productions of Black and queer women in the African diaspora, it is through the negotiation of being both Black and queer that I

³⁶ José Esteban, Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 25.

deploy Muñoz in order to explain how a representational contract is broken when the queer and the Black are made visible³⁷. Muñoz is instructive in his observations as he argues that a person can only represent what they see and what they see is often dependent on their position relative to the observed: which is to say, the ability to observe and represent a thing is a question of power. Thus, when we speak of representation in this regard, a major tension that arises is the concern that often whoever is in control of the image's portrayal becomes naturalized as a political authority. Given my own positionality as a media practitioner, I am aware that I have to constantly practice self-reflexivity and negotiate an ethical relationship with activism and media visibility.

A scholar that similarly vacillates between these two roles- practitioner and scholar- is Sheena Howard. Whilst Howard's work falls within the broader field of communications studies, I would like to argue for its necessity within the interdisciplinary field that I am attempting to demarcate. Consequently, *Black Queer Identity Matrix* presents a theory of an "integrated identity framework"³⁸ in order to address the ways in which popular political activism and academic scholarship has often excluded Black lesbian identities and experiences. In confronting the absence of certain voices within mainstream LGBTQ political projects and the related conflict in feminist and queer studies scholarship, Howard proposes a queer matrix lens for scholars to think of identity through an intersectional lens. I will be honest and attest that I find it curious that Howard's text emerges only in 2014 as the first to offer a framework that focuses specifically on Black lesbian identity, especially if we are to consider how expressive the Black lesbian voice was in the 1970s and 1980s. Building on Roderick Ferguson's queer of color critique methodology, Howard

³⁷ This is a reading strategy I deploy in analyzing the self-portraiture work of South African queer artist, Zanele Muholi.

³⁸ Sheena C. Howard, *Black Queer Identity Matrix: Towards an Integrated Queer of Color Framework*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

challenges queer theory's use of rhetoric that often privileges whiteness and instead proposes for a combined application of three foundational pillars: standpoint theory, Afrocentricity, and matrix of domination theory.

By closely engaging the critical interventions made by the aforementioned scholars, what I hope to make bare at the end of this discussion is that the contemporary moment we find ourselves in is marked by the impossibility of Blackness to be defined in normative terms as far as gender and sexuality are concerned. Following Zakiyyah Jackson's instruction in *Waking Nightmares*, I argue that due to slavery and colonialism's commodification of Black people's bodies, gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories in any attempt to articulate Black queer difference³⁹. Here, Jackson forewarns that such a predicament necessitates for an ethical disinvestment in heteropatriarchy and its ideological underpinnings within the fields of cinema and media studies. It is from this vantage point that I seek to make evident the generative scope presented by Black Queer theory and Queer of color critique as arenas that open up frameworks, methodologies and epistemologies for a decolonized Cinema and Media Studies field.

It is important to note that this practice of decoloniality is one preoccupied with the possibilities of making Black Queer life and thought despite ongoing Black negation. The frame of moving beyond negation is one that is furthered by queer diaspora scholar, Keguro Macharia. I find Macharia incredibly generative for interrogating how certain forms of thinking about Blackness and queerness often get stuck on negation, whether that is mapping, documenting, theorizing, or narrating negation. Further, Macharia forewarns that the danger of working against negation is that scholars often become entrapped by binaries of response and resistance. It is with

³⁹ Zakiyyah Iman. Jackson, "Waking Nightmares." *GLQ* 17 (2): 2011, 357–63.

such critical awareness that I seek to situate my project in terrain that is instead, interested in how Blackness and queerness understands, imagines, and invents itself in order to assert a subjectivity that does not only survive but also thrive. To combat the white heteropatriarchal disciplinary formations of Cinema and Media Studies, I am interested in the use of the Black queer imagination in helping open up questions of Black queer life and invention thus moving beyond the binaries of oppression and resistance.

As a final thematic consideration, I would like to now turn my attention to Tina Campt's enactment of decolonial praxis through a close consideration of the key methodological interventions she opens up for Black visual studies in her text entitled: *Listening to Images*. I engage this text as central in helping me formulate a nuanced account of how Black women's visual practices are able to subvert what Tina Campt has identified as "technologies of capture"⁴⁰. I must make clear from this point on that I am in fact uninterested in remaining within the dynamics of oppression and resistance, oppression and agency, as the dominant frames within which Black life is thought and theorized. Consequently, I find the framework of "quiet" as conceived by Campt as extremely generative in helping me postulate this position. What I am positing here is that Tina Campt's use of the Black feminist imagination serves as a powerful attempt to inscribe a visual practice that shifts the gaze towards the mundane and the quotidian.

Clearly put, Campt advances both an intervention and a proposition for which listening to images is at once both descriptive and methodological, an intervention that inaugurates "radical interpretive possibilities"⁴¹ that are not simply determined through sight, but through aurality and tactility. Campt's study ruminates on two central questions that I argue for as initiating new and

⁴⁰ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images*. 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 5.

imaginative avenues for engaging a Black visual history marked by Black women's negation and subjugation. These questions probe, how do we build a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that grapples with the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed? This is a question that cannot be read as simply having an answer. Hence, what is becoming clearer to me as I wrestle for my own space in the field is that I cannot fixate on finding an "answer" that will resolve the "Black visual problem". This is an idea I demonstrate in my final chapter, as I opt to instead develop a Black feminist visual grammar.

As I have demonstrated in my engagement of the Black feminist and queer theoretical interventions, what becomes evident is that Visual Studies is indeed inherently interdisciplinary. By revealing how the field of vision has continued to make marginal assessments on the compounding intersections between race, gender and sexuality, the aforementioned scholars are able to inaugurate new disciplinary avenues. What these Black feminist and Queer interventions reveal to us is that the question of the visual is one that is completely bound up with the disciplinary formations in art history, performance studies, theories of race, visual culture, surveillance studies and feminism. Furthermore, this reveals that the inclination to engage with these fields as though they are disparate is in fact a colonialist impulse. Therefore, by centering Black feminist and queer of color thought as a critical intervention in visual studies, I argue that such a mediation is indeed a decolonial practice. In the same breath however, I have to make note of what I observe to be a central weakness in many of the discussed texts. The limited and marginal practice of diaspora is rather disconcerting. What I mean by this is that diaspora is not simply a noun however, diaspora is a verb. To invoke Brent Hayes Howard, I argue that diaspora is not merely a historical condition than a set of practices through which Black intellectuals pursue a variety of international

alliances⁴². Hence, to think diasporically, is to actively cite and grapple with theorists that exceed the bounds of the Euro-American ivory tower. By continuing to pursue shallow engagements of Africa, where the continent is only considered for the excavation of “interesting case studies”, I argue that western scholars run the risk of participating in the relegation of Africa as a voyeuristic entity instead of it being seen and appropriately engaged as a rich historiographical and theoretical site.

⁴² Brent Hayes. Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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CHAPTER ONE:

Blackness as Oceanic Boundlessness: The Audibility of Black Visuality in the films of Julie

Dash and Sarah Maldoror

*Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow*⁴³.

*This is a story of us, a story of [B]lack aliveness as the being of us. Imagine a [B]lack world: The invocation of a [B]lack world is the operating assumption of [B]lack texts, a world where [B]lackness exists in the tussle of being, in reverie and terribleness, in exception and in ordinariness.*⁴⁴

We were all aware. The Black community was aware of what was going on in Africa because we were looking around for some help. —Max Roach

Introduction

This chapter provides a careful examination of the films *Daughters of the Dust*⁴⁵ and *Léon G. Damas*⁴⁶ to frame the aesthetic practices of Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror as being Black expressive forms already encoded with strategies of creative resistance to hegemonic

⁴³ Christina Elizabeth. Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

⁴⁴ Kevin Everod. Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 1.

⁴⁵ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film), Digital.

⁴⁶ *Leon G Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, (1994; France: Conseil Régional de la Guyane, Motuba Films, 1995), Digital.

cinemas. This project looks towards how the cinematic realm is mobilized by Dash and Maldoror through sonic registers to facilitate Black healing in the form of producing alternative and decolonial visual grammars. By using the camera as a revolutionary weapon to heal how we *see* ourselves, Dash and Maldoror function as cultural producers, griots and conduits who are enacting a healing of the wound of oppressive visual histories.

Through an intimate meditation on these filmic works, I wish to illuminate how Black women filmmakers can tap into the affective registers of jazz music in order to enact a genre of Black visibility that is boundless and one that escapes colonial capture. Dash and Maldoror are working against violent visual histories thereby in pulling from jazz music they are able to access diasporic memory as a narrative structure and a form of archival repository of counter-hegemonic aesthetics. By privileging the use of music and the sonic landscape in the works of Maldoror and Dash, I attempt to offer a radical account of filmic histories that are preoccupied with the articulation of a decolonial Black aesthetic. Contending for what Arthur Jafa identifies as Black film's ability to "transmit the power, beauty and alienation embedded within Black music"⁴⁷, I shall demonstrate the ways in which Sarah Maldoror and Julie Dash mobilize the music's affective power to produce a visual grammar rooted in liberatory Black feminist aesthetics.

Wake Work

Daughters of the Dust is set in 1902 among the members of the Peazant family whose ancestors were brought to Ibo Landing as enslaved people. Given this historical backdrop, the film's narrative unfolds through a series of intimate memories that are able to subvert hegemonic accounts of the history of slavery. Similarly, *Leon G Damas* mobilizes intimate memories from

⁴⁷ Jafa, Arthur. *Plonsker Family Lecture in Contemporary Art: Arthur Jafa*. 10 November 2022. <https://artmuseum.williams.edu/event/plonsker-family-lecture-in-contemporary-art-arthur-jafa/>

members of the Negritude movement in order to confront the angst imbued in histories of migration and displacement. To situate the memory work and jazz aesthetics embedded in both these films, I draw from Christina Sharpe's conceptual framework defined as *wake work*. I argue that the chosen films' use of jazz music is indeed a form of *wake work* and thus an enactment of decolonial aesthetics.

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe interrogates literary, visual, cinematic, and quotidian representations of Black life which she conceives as always marked by death and (un)survival. Whilst Sharpe makes clear that the present and contemporary moment be understood as the aftermath of the catastrophic histories of slavery and various forms of colonialisms, what I find most compelling and useful for my study is that she proposes *wake work* as an antidote and a form of intracommunal Black care ethics —the labor enacted by Black cultural producers who create cultural works that seek to bear witness of what marks Black life in the wake. To expand the scope of *wake work* as a form of Black feminist labor, I further look to Daphne Brooks' *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* as her theoretical interventions serve as instructive for the purposes of this chapter. Brooks interweaves Black feminist theories and the sonic practices of Black women musicians in order to advance a counter-history of the blues that engages Black women as sonic-curators, archivists and essentially decolonial cultural workers. By closely engaging the sound performances enacted by blues women, Brooks frames these sonic practices as belonging to a Black radical tradition that is able to forge a different epistemic relationship with the world⁴⁸. Nudging us towards the liberatory possibilities found in the sonic frequencies, Brooks “pays attention not only to the expressive

⁴⁸ Daphne A, Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 29.

singing voice in the making of the modern but also to the recorded expressive practices of Black women musicians and the ways in which said practices constitute innovations in modern, technological cultural production”⁴⁹.

To this end, I position Dash and Maldoror as diasporic interlocutors who lean into the sonic registers to modulate and remix histories of Black visibility. I further profess that they use the camera as an ideological tool geared towards the insistence of Black life, Black joy and Black creativity in spite of persistent Black death⁵⁰. By highlighting how these filmmakers uniquely turn towards jazz music as a space with utopian possibilities through an insistence on the beauty that survives the ashes of historical injustice, I hope to make clear that music becomes a form of *wake work* rooted in decoloniality and a praxis of Black being in the diaspora. Whilst I demonstrate in a different chapter on Zanele Muholi that the visible Black body *troubles*⁵¹ the dominant visual field, this chapter embarks on the task of proposing that we move beyond an attempt to merely *see* the Black visual. Instead, I probe that we move towards the *audibility* of Black visibility. To ground this intervention, I implore that we consider; how does jazz music act as a generative register for the articulation of a Black feminist aesthetic? In this regard, I position the filmic works of Maldoror and Dash as embedding within them decoloniality as a praxis, given the Black feminist aesthetics embedded within their films. I argue that the centering of jazz music alongside powerful cinematic visuals in both films, are clear demonstrations of this call towards the audibility of Black visibility.

⁴⁹ Daphne A, Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 30.

⁵⁰ Black death in this regard also includes epistemological violence and erasure.

⁵¹ See Nicole Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (2011).

Ingoma: Jazz Music and Black Epistemologies

Drawing from the Zulu language as a form of epistemology, I use the word *ingoma* as a form of Black diasporic poetics to highlight the important function of music in both films and within the broader realm of Black visibility. For clarity's sake, the word *ingoma* in the broader sense can be translated in English terms as a referent to music. However, as we know, the English language seldom has the capacity to hold the gravitas of most indigenous languages and cultural practices. Drawing from Ngugi wa Thion'go's thesis in the text entitled; *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, I similarly argue for the Zulu language as a medium that has the ability to convey the culture's experience, beliefs, values, and knowledge. Whilst African cultures are not monolithic, in the abovementioned text, Ngugi is able to effectively demonstrate how African cultures are passed down from one generation to another through various oral traditions like narratives, riddles, songs, dances, and stories, of which have all rested upon language as a medium for propagation. Thus, he positions language as a form of culture in that it serves as a "collective memory bank of a people's experience in history⁵²". It is to this end that he argues that an important part of decolonizing literatures from Africa is by telling our stories in our own languages.

Positing that culture is a product of history, Ngugi asserts that language is the tool we use to reflect on that history. Essentially, what he means is that history reproduces culture every time we reflect upon it. Thus, I draw from the isiZulu language to locate the boundlessness of Black diasporic forms of knowing (Black epistemologies), and how the word *ingoma* as understood in nguni cultures, also refers to the sphere of healing. Yes, as much as Black creative and scholarly

⁵² Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1986), 15.

works have demonstrated, music appears to be an important register not only to Black cultural making but also to its healing power. Whilst I do not mean to suggest that all Black creativity (specifically music in this instance) comes from a plane that necessitates healing, due to the collective trauma of global anti-Blackness, music has proven to be the most resonate and most accessible form of collective and communal Black healing.

Before I provide further context for how I plan to deploy *ingoma* in reference to Dash and Maldoror's engagement of music, I would like to slightly elaborate on how this study understands the history of jazz. It is important to note that to describe the history of jazz in a linear form is misleading because whilst jazz music can be said to have emerged in New Orleans, some can say that it is the continuum of a sound that originated from Africa. Having emerged in the public scene around 1916-17, the history regarding the origins of jazz music have inaugurated major debates around opportunity, ownership, origination, and representation⁵³. It is for this reason that this study seeks to do away with a narrative of jazz that overstates location and singular celebrity figures. Due to this dissertation's overall preoccupation with diasporic Blackness, I find it more appropriate that we eschew the grand narrative of jazz history that is based on a canon of key figures and recordings.

In *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalization*, Bruce Johnson provides a compelling account for a historiography of jazz music that escapes the gravitational pull of the US-centric canonical model. He argues, instead, for greater attention to how jazz developed in, and continues to do so in, countries beyond the USA. To support this logic, he proposes: "Jazz was not 'invented' and then exported. It was invented in the process of being disseminated. As both idea and practice, jazz came into being through negotiation with the vehicles of its dissemination, and with conditions it

⁵³ See, *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz* by Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (2002).

encountered in any given location”⁵⁴. Whilst Johnson maintains that jazz was already a music in motion from its inception, he is also careful to acknowledge that the genre’s most influential early impact was in Chicago even as it first shifted from New Orleans. He further notes the genre’s ability to adapt and shapeshift in accordance with each geographical sociopolitical landscape. To this end, he cites the case of Black South Africans who saw jazz as a rallying call to a new era of emancipation⁵⁵. By sustaining a historiography of jazz that is fluid in terms of location, Johnson is able to demonstrate the ways in which “women were far more prominent in jazz and improvisational performance and related media technologies than masculinist histories have recognized”⁵⁶. Such an observation is critical as it is aligned with the feminist sensibility that undergirds this project.

Whilst I find Johnson’s study incredibly generative for helping us move beyond US centric historiographies of jazz, I need to also state that I read his interventions cautiously. After all, his own racial and gender positioning as a white Australian man need to be equally interrogated especially if we are moving from a premise that politically understands jazz as the invention of Black cultural producers. Moving with this in mind—I hope to have sufficiently made plain, that for the purposes of this study, jazz music is characterized by oceanic boundlessness as an improvisational music form that initially developed out of many forms of music, including blues, spirituals, hymns etc. It is this fluid nature of space/time travel of jazz music that intrigues me. Whilst one cannot separate jazz music from the context that marks it as a product of African American cultural production, I propose that we in fact consider jazz as a migration song that

⁵⁴ Bruce Johnson, *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2019), 39/

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

⁵⁶ Bruce Johnson, *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation*, 46.

contemplates how diasporic Blackness survives displacement. Thus, I position Maldoror and Dash as contemporaries and interlocutors involved in a diasporic “call and response” for how they both mobilize jazz music as a sound that might also be involved in a form of cultural retention that links the new world to the African continent.

Since jazz music animates the cinematic universes constructed by Dash and Maldoror I would like to further synchronize their cinematic practices as being marked by the decolonial possibilities exemplified in free jazz music. In *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, David E. James and Morgan Woolsey demonstrate how jazz music expansively played “a vital role in the ongoing project of restoring denied humanity and interiority to Black cinematic subjects”⁵⁷. Ingrid Monson echoes this idea by connecting jazz music as a symbol of social progress, self-determination, freedom, excellence, and spirituality⁵⁸. Given that the films examined in this chapter follow the aesthetic traditions found in jazz music, I postulate that Dash and Maldoror create a cinematic vocabulary that is analogous to the improvisational tradition found in *Free Jazz*.

In the early 1960s young jazz musicians began to take a more experimental approach to jazz improvisation so as to do away with formal, melodic, and rhythmical limits. This new music went unnamed for a while with some calling it the “New Thing” until it came to be known as *Free Jazz*. In the attempt to situate Dash and Maldoror within the decolonial aesthetics of *free jazz* and improvisation, it is important to understand the ways in which free jazz resists expropriation and rejects the musical and extra-musical values of dominant ideology—which are capitalist and white.

⁵⁷ David E. James, “Anticipations of the Rebellion: Black Music and Politics in Some Earlier Cinemas” in *L.A. Rebellion*, 1st ed. (California: University of California Press, 2015), 177.

⁵⁸ Ingrid T. Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 312.

David E. James asserts that: “Free Jazz’s atonality, metrical irregularity, complete freedom of improvisation, grounding in the body, and eagerness to use all kinds of unconventional sounds—produced one of the most notable instances of the re-creation of musical forms in materiality of [Black cinema] itself, the innovation of a specific mode of film musicality⁵⁹.”

In *Free Jazz/Black Power*, Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli demonstrate that Free Jazz was a musical counterpart to the Black Power Movement and an “attempt to achieve cultural freedom, echoing the struggles of Black [people] for their political and economic freedom”⁶⁰. They further ascertain that this form of jazz music endeavored to regain and *build* a specifically [Afro-diasporic] culture. Thus, the *Free* in free jazz did not simply indicate the rejection and/or sublimation of certain musical norms that once belonged to jazz; it also confronted a colonized music with a music and a culture involved in, and produced by, anti-imperialist and revolutionary culture⁶¹. This is an important observation to consider especially in aligning Maldoror and Dash’s engagement with the sonic frequencies of the genre which in turn reflect the counter-hegemonic aesthetics embedded in their films. Therefore, it is critical to reiterate that *free jazz* as collective improvisation music deliberately plays outside of the stylistic norms of “classical jazz”, and it is this particular form of revising and *othering* hegemonic musical aesthetics that are deployed in the film: *Daughters of the Dust*. Whilst Carles and Comolli understand the tradition of free jazz as an African American invention, it is important to note that both the genre and the Black Power movement were in fact in dialogue with African diasporic sensibilities and politics. The decolonization of Africa spanned from the mid-1950s to 1975 and coincided with the militancy

⁵⁹ David E. James, “Anticipations of the Rebellion: Black Music and Politics in Some Earlier Cinemas” in *L.A. Rebellion*, 1st ed. (California: University of California Press, 2015), 161.

⁶⁰ Carles, Philippe, and Jean-Louis Comolli. *Free Jazz/Black Power/* by *Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli: Translated by Grégory Pierrot* (Jackson Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

that had inspired the Black Power Movement. This inspired more jazz musicians to go as far as drawing stronger ties with the African continent and an example of this is seen in Max Roach's⁶² time spent in Ghana⁶³. Ingrid Monson provides more context on these Afro-diasporic links to jazz music in *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*.

To this end, I argue that this type of sonic improvisation is what Fred Moten defines as being “fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said to break every enclosure”⁶⁴. The genre's ability to defy enclosure performs a *flight* that springs forth a radical *elsewhere*—and it is this liberatory flight that interests me the most as it lends itself towards the articulation of a decolonial aesthetic. What I hope to make clear by the end of this chapter is that by leaning into the sonic frequencies of Black diasporic creative productions, we can begin to access alternative histories of Black being that are marked by liberatory possibilities. More specifically, I see jazz music as an improvisational music genre of self-making and Black diasporic cultural memory. This improvisational quality is most clearly illustrated in the character of Nana Peasant who uses memory to connect her present with the past of her ancestors. In her moments of *recollecting* and *remembering* the family history, she performs the function of a jazz improvisation. In this regard, remembering doubles as spontaneous improvisation.

⁶² Max Roach is the pioneer of the subgenre in jazz music known as *bepob*. He also worked in many other styles of music however his most noteworthy project for this dissertation is *We Insist! —Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* which was released in December 1960. The album falls within the aesthetic traditions of *Free Jazz* and is primarily concerned with the theme of African independence movements as demonstrated in the songs: “All Africa” and “Tears for Johannesburg”.

⁶³ An oral historical account of Max Roach's time in Ghana is contextualized in the following recorded conversation between him and Ghanaian drummer: Kofi Ghanaba formerly known as Guy Warren
<https://www.colorado.edu/amrc/sites/default/files/attached-files/AMRC%20Journal%20pages%20Vol.%2020.pdf>

⁶⁴ Ingrid T. Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 179.

As per the apt observations made by Daphne Brooks, listening to Black women whose labor can be measured in sound is a form of historical recourse⁶⁵. Drawing from the theoretical teachings made by Richard Iton, Brooks determines that Black women’s sonic labor can innovate “potentially transformative” and “thickly emancipatory and substantively post-colonial visions”⁶⁶. Thus, the sonic and creative methods that are enacted by Dash and Maldoror are exemplary of the decolonial Black aesthetic that I am in search of throughout the pages of this dissertation project.

Critical Fabulation and Counter-Histories

Through my engagement with the filmic works of Dash and Maldoror, I shall demonstrate the ways in which both filmmakers offer narratives that can be constituted as counter-historiographies. As aforementioned, I contend that we consider both *Daughters of the Dust* and *Leon G Damas* as decolonial archival repositories through their engagement of jazz music as a form of Afro-diasporic memory. I understand history to be a project that is already framed within gendered and racialized terms. What Toni Morrison defines as “the grand master narrative”⁶⁷ and what Saidiya Hartman challenges as history with a capital H, is the idea of history that is synonymous to heteronormative and western accounts of the past. Thus, if we understand Black women as being muted and erased from the so-called grand master narrative of history then it is only appropriate to position Black women’s filmic engagements of history as constituting decolonial renderings of history.

⁶⁵ Daphne A, Brooks. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 26.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 27.

⁶⁷ See Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as an example of this.

To sufficiently account for these filmic works as constituting decolonial archives and counter-histories, I draw from the theories fashioned by Saidiya Hartman in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. What foregrounds Hartman's preoccupation with recovering "impossible" and marginal histories is her ability to restore a dimension of the repressed personal by inscribing Black memory and history without reproducing notions of the spectacular, as it pertains to Black life. Instead, one is prodded to stay immersed within the everyday lives of Black women and girls, who navigated the terrains of New York City and Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century, without fleeing into spectacle or pathology.

What I find most enriching in this text, for my own study, is its ability to disrupt and challenge the anthropological underpinnings of canonized histories, which often prescribe methodologies that seek closure and finality. Instead, Hartman corrupts the binaries that often govern history as either 'official' or 'unofficial' and cites critical fabulation as a subversive reading strategy of history. Whilst she uses the raw materials of institutional archives — like most historians — she grapples with that material to create a window into intimate histories of freedom. This is enacted by using storytelling and speculative narration to correct history's omissions, particularly of enslaved people. What I shall demonstrate in my analysis of *Daughters* is that Dash foregrounds Nana Peazant's use of memory as a form of counter-historiography. By creating a mythic filmic space in the form of "Ibo Landing", Dash engages myth and memory to subvert colonial histories of enslavement and thus enacts a liberatory aesthetic. Similarly, Maldoror also enacts a form of *ingoma* by synchronizing the personal histories of the Negritude movement with the Afro-diasporic memory function performed by jazz music. Ultimately, both filmmakers are comparable to Hartman's function as a theorist in that their films serve as a counter-strategy to obscure erasure and evade archival absence with a liberatory and decolonial visual grammar.

Historical Context

Before we delve into a close reading of the sonic and visual liberatory aesthetics galvanized in the films of Dash and Maldoror, I would like to provide a brief historical context that shapes the sociopolitical backdrop leading up to the films' inception. It is also important that I make clear that at the time of the film's release, both Dash and Maldoror emerge from a historical context under which the realm of film has "functioned as a space that has been westernized through an intentional lack of attention to alternative possibilities"⁶⁸. Taking direction from Kara Keeling's articulation of Dash's cultural significance in Black diasporic film history, this chapter further considers Dash's commitment to making movies that are simultaneously art and weapon⁶⁹. With this in mind, I think it is important to situate Dash as a practitioner who was working in concert with the film movement termed as "The LA Rebellion". Impacted by the LA Rebellion's anti-Hollywood aesthetics and Black-liberation politics, Dash's filmic aesthetics can be argued for as being committed towards decoloniality.

Similarly, Maldoror's filmic commitment towards documenting the anti-colonial struggle in Africa and her life-long comradery with the Negritude movement set her apart as an archivist whose filmic practice constitutes an alternative form of historiography and a model for cultural and artistic practices devoted towards revolutionary struggle. Both Dash and Maldoror seem to bear the title of "firsts"⁷⁰ as they both emerge within their diasporic contexts as the first Black

⁶⁸ For further elaboration, see Bâ Saër Maty's *De-westernizing Film Studies* (2012).

⁶⁹ Keeling, Kara. 2011. *School of Life. (Films during the L.A. Rebellion or the Los Angeles School)*. *Artforum International*. Vol. 50. New York: Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

⁷⁰ I wish to make clear that whilst both Dash and Maldoror become the first Black women within their diasporic contexts to successfully produce feature films, it is important to note that there is an abundant well of Black women who were already engaged in the creative practice of visual and filmmaking. Failure to point this out otherwise results in an erasure of those who continue to be written out of history due to a multitude of reasons that often boil down to who has access to material resources, funding and mainstream recognition.

women filmmakers to produce feature length films (Dash becomes the first Black woman in America in 1991 and Maldoror becomes the first African woman to produce films in the 1960s⁷¹).

Since this project understands history within the framework of the *wake*, it becomes important to perceive Dash and Maldoror as existing within a continuum of Black diasporic filmmakers who are actively grappling with epistemological interventions for how the Black body becomes understood and visualized through racial and gendered paradigms. Whilst this chapter does not offer a detailed study of the LA Rebellion and its relationship to third cinema, it is important to make mention of how the film movement not only informs Dash's gaze but also falls within a broader history of "Black intellectual production and cultural practice, including literature, jazz, theoretical inquiry, theater, and other visual arts"⁷². Thus, by understanding the sociopolitical context that shapes and informs Dash's cinematic vision, this will allow me to fully demonstrate how *Daughters* is a culmination of the decolonial aesthetics that characterize its visual and sonic world.

Julie Dash joined the UCLA film school in the 1970s, and this is where she became a part of the LA Rebellion, which interestingly, was initially written about by South African literature and film scholar—Ntongela Masilela⁷³. As I had briefly made mention in earlier parts of this paper, the LA Rebellion was a collective of Black insurgent filmmakers whose cinematic vision was then later articulated by Clyde Taylor as a mission to "stylistically liberate Black images from cultural

⁷¹ However, this tag for Maldoror comes with its own stench of controversy as other African women filmmakers highlighted that this title erased the work of those filmmakers who are born in the continent and that Maldoror was instead born in France to a Guadeloupean father and a French mother.

⁷² Keeling, Kara. 2011. *School of Life. (Films during the L.A. Rebellion or the Los Angeles School)*. *Artforum International*. Vol. 50. New York: Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

⁷³ In his 1993 essay; *The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers*, Ntongela Masilela, a South African-born scholar who was himself a member of the movement as an undergraduate, observes that the LA Rebellion consisted of two waves of filmmakers whose film training started in the short-lived Ethno-Communications Program at UCLA.

imprisonment”⁷⁴. In this instance, Taylor draws from Teshome Gabriel, who theorized on how indigenous Afro-American films project onto a social space and distinguish their project from the privatistic and individualistic space of Hollywood film. To place Masilela and Clyde Taylor as diasporic interlocutors is important for demonstrating how the LA rebellion can also be understood as a continuum of Third Cinema.

Third Cinema is a politicized film movement that began in Latin America in the late 1960s and Teshome Gabriel is one of the first scholars to critically theorize about this. In their 1968 call for a Third Cinema, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino describe the necessity of the deconstruction of deceptive images propagated in the neocolonial world and the creation of truthful, demystified images to take their place. “The cinema of the revolution is at the same time one of *destruction and construction*: destruction of the image that neocolonialism has created of itself and of us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in any of its expressions”⁷⁵. Thus, by contextualizing the LA Rebellion as a continuum of Third Cinema this forces us to reconsider the film movement as being one that is in conversation and informed by the larger African diaspora. Coming from this context and thus marking herself as a part of this decolonial mission, Dash offers *Daughters of the Dust* as a counter-history concerned with the specificity of Black women’s identity, their empowerment through mise-en-scène, and the rewriting of American history⁷⁶.

⁷⁴ See Clyde Taylor’s essay in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (2015).

⁷⁵ Gabriel, Teshome H. *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982).

⁷⁶ Manthia Diawara. *Black American Cinema*. 1st edition. (Oxford: Routledge, 1993), 14.

Daughters of the Dust

Set in 1902, *Daughters of the Dust* uses the canvas of Ibo Landing in the Sea Islands to offer a counter-history of African American slavery, the middle passage, and the survival of African diasporic traditions. Synth music accompanied by the sound of beating drums immediately enter the frame in order to set the stage for a visual narrative that is a universe unto itself. This marriage between synth music and drums will become heightened as the story develops, to symbolize the diasporic link between the Peasant family and the “old spirits” of their African ancestors. Whilst it might be tempting to liken the relationship between synth music and drums to the digital and analogue divide, I think this might be reductive. Simply put, I believe that Dash employs these sonic registers to propose that we complicate our understanding of time and temporality. The interweaving of the sonic into the visual narrative becomes a praxis of decoloniality in that it offers an aesthetic that realigns western temporalities. Two minutes into this sonic conjure and the viewer is immediately notified that:

“At the turn of the century, sea island Gullahs, descendants of African captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result of their isolation, the Gullah created and maintained a distinct, imaginative, and original African American culture”⁷⁷.

The above words preface the visual world that one is about to encounter and also prepare us for the counter-history that Dash is about to cinematically unravel. By prefacing the culture of her people as being distinct and imaginative, Dash prepares the viewer for a recovery project that is rooted in memory and mysticism.

⁷⁷ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

As I begin to provide a closer analysis of the film, it shall become clear that a detailed listening of the film score is able to exemplify the ways in which sound and music carry memory. Thus, a serious consideration of the film's sonic frequencies can reveal Dash's assemblage of a counter-history. It is clear from the onset that Dash is not concerned with hegemonic accounts of history that are rooted in "accuracy" for she understands the danger at which these histories reproduce the violence of racial calculus. To situate her function as a cinematic griot, Dash reveals to the viewer that: "Gullah communities *recalled, remembered and recollected* much of what their ancestors brought with them from Africa"⁷⁸. By projecting these words on the screen, Dash solidifies the narrative as one that is concerned with memory-keeping. Thus, it becomes significant to note that it is indeed, Nana Peazant—the family matriarch—who enters the frame first. The synth music retreats, and the drumming sounds take to the fore as though to immediately indicate Nana's function as the elder who has stronger ties to the family's African past. This sonic rupture of the drums is the enactment of *ingoma* as the drums serve as a collective memory that connects Nana and the Peazant family to their African history.

⁷⁸ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).



Figure 1: Nana Peasant takes a bath in a river, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

Through the form of a medium shot, Nana emerges from a body of water and is revealed as being surrounded by the perfect elements of nature—trees and water. There is something ritualistic in how Nana washes her body whilst being fully clothed as it signals indigenous African spiritual practices where water is used as a channel—to cleanse and fortify oneself. As the film unfolds, it becomes evident that water becomes somewhat of a visual motif and a recurring narrative feature that connects the Peasant family to the histories of the middle passage and Africa. I also tie the presence of water as being symbolic of Christina Sharpe’s conception of *the wake*—“the past that is not past reappears, always, to ruptures the present”⁷⁹. Afterall, *Daughters* is a story that is deeply invested in memory and its contentious relationship with hegemonic history. The dim lighting in this frame only reveals the outline of Nana’s body, hiding her face from the viewer so that we pay extra attention to the voice of the narrator resounding:

⁷⁹ Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

“I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the barren one and many are my daughters. I am the silence that you cannot understand. I am the utterance of my name”⁸⁰.

This poetic declaration reveals a story that is marked by duality and prepares the viewer for a filmic universe that subverts western linearity through the use of a double narrative that is driven by Nana Peazant and the unborn child.

I further observe this double narrative as being representative of the collaborative nature of jazz music which is a sonic landscape that is incorporated into the making of the film score. As the narrator’s voice summons our attention, the camera cuts away from Nana and our gaze is steered towards the environment that surrounds her. Transitioning to a long shot, the camera cuts to an even wider stream of water as a boat slowly draws nearer to reveal a woman draped in white clothes—standing inside of the boat as three men row her to shore. Standing firm, with one hand on her hip, the figure in the boat escapes our gaze as her face is hidden behind a large-brimmed hat covered in white lace. I find it interesting that whilst we are a few minutes into the film, Dash is careful to initially conceal the faces of her characters as though to evade the ideological function of the camera as a technology of capture. Instead, she is careful to use sounding music, voice-over, costume, and the environment as narrative devices that lay the foundation of the story. The camera zooms into the hand of the woman (who will soon be introduced as Yellow-Mary) as she tightly holds onto a neck pendant. Much later into the story, we learn that this pendant is the Saint Christopher’s charm for travelers on a journey. In this opening scene, Dash is able to reveal that the story to be unfolded is one of heterogeneity, and the convergence of old and new spiritual

⁸⁰ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

beliefs—as represented in Nana’s river bath/cleansing and Yellow-Mary’s Saint Christopher’s charm. These visual cues are rather symbolic as the story is indeed one of migration—as the Peasant family gathers for their last supper before the family migrates to the North. Enacting the experimental and improvisational traditions found in free jazz, Dash heightens and infuses the sound of the water with the drums and eerie synth music. This is a union of the old and new—the sacred and the profane. The music functions as *ingoma* and a collective memory bank to highlight the convergence of Afro-diasporic histories and the New World.

In earlier parts of my discussion, I propose that we see jazz music as a migration song that contemplates how diasporic Blackness survives displacement. Through this proposition, I would liken the Peasant family’s story of migration to a jazz song. The visual narrative conjured by Dash unfolds similarly to the transcendent nature of *free jazz*. Similarly to how Free jazz musicians thought of their own aesthetic practices in terms of political commitment, Dash’s cinematic aesthetic is heavily committed to revising and othering hegemonic film aesthetics. The foregrounding of jazz music becomes a symbol of self-determination, freedom, and spirituality. Analogously, to her LA Rebellion film counterparts, Dash employs jazz music as an integral component of her own expressive vocabulary “or as an intertextual medium through which cinematic and social concerns may be conjured”⁸¹. As poignantly observed by David E. James, “Rebellion films found inspiration and a frame of reference of conjoined aesthetic and political significance in the historically self-aware traditions of [jazz] music. Its disciplined spontaneity, rhythmic complexity, and textural nuance provided powerful models for expressive visual composition, while also mobilizing community identity, pride, and resistance against

⁸¹ James, E. David. “Anticipations of the Rebellion: Black Music and Politics in Some Earlier Cinemas”. in *L.A. Rebellion*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2015), 157.

marginalization and oppression”⁸². Ingrid Monson concedes with this idea by observing that “free jazz has been championed as the embodiment of revolutionary Black nationalism, as well as a path toward deeper spiritual truth, universality, and internationalism”⁸³. These aesthetic commitments are rather evident in *Daughters* which is a universe unto itself. The Peasant family remains strongly tied to their African ancestors and it is Nana Peasant who facilitates this link between Africa and the New World. In subsequent parts of my analysis, I shall demonstrate further on how Nana’s performance of *remembering* and *recollecting* is emblematic of the revolutionary and decolonial potential marked in jazz music. By foregrounding her accounts of *remembering* with heavy drum percussions, Dash distinguishes Nana as being more connected to her African ancestors and their wisdom thus, ceding ideological power to Nana as a griot and a living archive of her family histories.

Taking musical heed to Dash’s narrative structure, John Barnes, the composer of the filmic score spans a variety of instruments to evoke the magic and mystery of the film’s themes. Dash reveals that “in composing the soundtrack, Barnes spanned the continents and musical genres by using a myriad of instruments, including the synclavier, the Middle Eastern santour, African *bata*⁸⁴ drums and African talking drums⁸⁵. He successfully mixed the synclavier-based percussion with authentic music from Africa, India and the Middle East”⁸⁶. This is illustrative of the breakdown of

⁸²James, E. David. “Anticipations of the Rebellion: Black Music and Politics in Some Earlier Cinemas”. in *L.A. Rebellion*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2015), 157.

⁸³ Ingrid T. Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁸⁴ The *bata* drum is one of the most important drums in the Yoruba land and is used for traditional and religious activities among the Yoruba. The early function of the *bata* was as a drum of different gods, of royalty, of ancestors and a drum of politicians, impacting all spheres of life in Yoruba land. Yusuf, Fathia Abolore (2022). <https://fatherlandgazette.com/the-bata-drum/>

⁸⁵ Talking drums are some of the oldest instruments used by West African griots.

⁸⁶ See more on <https://juliedash.tv/the-music/>

form and rhythmic structure in free jazz—which has been seen by critics, such as Ingrid Monson, to coincide with jazz musicians' exposure to and use of elements from non-Western music, especially African, Arabic, and Indian. Combining distinct *African Batà drums* and *African talking drums*, Barnes utilizes musical expression in order to depict traditional West-African worship ritual and Baptist beliefs. Thus, the music serves as an archival repository in that the traditional African instruments evoked carry histories that can be traced all the way back to the continent. This distinct drum sound is often more prominent in the scenes that accompany Nana Peazant's theme as though to reinforce the idea of Nana being the family member that is closely tied to older African traditions. This is demonstrated in the graveyard scene between Nana and her grandson Eli⁸⁷.



Figure 2: Nana Peazant and her grandson Eli Peazant at the family gravesite, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

⁸⁷ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

Dash sets the scene with gloomy synth music and a medium shot that reveals Nana's lower frame moving through a site of erect tombstones that have been half-hidden by the outgrown grass and weeds. Nana pulls away at the weeds to clear space for one of the tombstones before she seats herself in front of it. The camera crosscuts and through another medium shot, we gaze at Eli as he enters the frame to join his grandmother at the family gravesite. This visual is accompanied by gloomy synth music and eerie flutes to highlight the omnipresence of the spirits of the dead which occupy the graveyard. Nana is startled by the playfulness of her grandson who creeps in from behind to surprise her with a hug and a kiss. I observe this moment of tenderness between Eli and Nana to be noteworthy as it prefaces a scene that will soon be marked by Eli's recollection of painful memories. Thus, to prolong this moment of shared tenderness and intimacy, the camera crosscuts to a group of Peasant girls playing and dancing in unison next to the seashore.

Our gaze is zoomed into a closeup shot that lingers on the girls' legs which are covered in white stockings and strapped boots. The frame transitions to a long shot that illustrates the girls as they play and clap in unison. With the ocean serving as a backdrop, Dash's gaze reveals the beauty of the girls who are "richly adorned with different hues of Blackness and Black hairstyles⁸⁸". This serves to highlight the heterogeneity of Black women's beauty and serves as a radical counter image of racist Hollywood imagery which has often marked Eurocentric features as an accepted beauty standard. There is something so beautiful and tender in highlighting Black children enact beauty, joy, and laughter thus I observe this scene as a deliberate attempt to mark the beauty of the Black quotidian—to enact beauty as a method to access dreams of freedom. Saidiya Hartman provides a rich grammar for the articulation of beauty as a method and asserts:

⁸⁸ Manthia Diawara. *Black American Cinema*. 1st edition. (Oxford: Routledge, 1993), 14.

“It is hard to explain what’s beautiful about a rather ordinary colored girl, a face difficult to discern in the crowd, an average chorine not destined to be a star or even the heroine of a feminist plot. In some regard, it is to recognize the obvious that is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of the black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free. Beauty is not a luxury; it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, a transfiguration of the given”⁸⁹.

The above Black feminist grammar captures the essence of how Dash is able to rupture the wake of painful histories by punctuating them with the beauty of the Black mundane. This signaling of the Black ordinary humanizes the Peazant family and demonstrates a level of care ethic that is enacted by Dash’s gaze. The Black feminist care ethic that I observe here serves to highlight Dash’s disinterest in creating a spectacle of the family’s traumatic history. The laughter and playfulness exhibited by the Peazant grandchildren in the beach shot is positioned in stark difference to the image of the grave site where both Eli and Nana are contrasted in dark clothing. Eli kneels across from Nana, as a tombstone stands erect between them as if to symbolize the ease with which the Black living commune with the dead. It seems that Eli can discern Nana’s sadness about her family’s imminent migration to the North thus he reassures her by saying: “Just ‘cause we crossing over to the mainland, it doesn’t mean we don’t love you. It doesn’t mean we’re not going to miss you none”⁹⁰. This seems to soften Nana as she playfully teases along at great-grandson. The camera shifts to a medium shot revealing the back of Nana as a she sits facing Eli,

⁸⁹ Saidiya V Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 33.

⁹⁰ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

whilst the full view of the tombstone that stands in-between them faces the camera and reads: “Shad Peazant 1802-1863”.

Whilst Shad Peazant is not embodied in this scene, it can be argued that Dash situates him as a spiritual presence who continues to commune with the living. Nana attests to this as she reveals: “I visit with old Peazant everyday since the day him died. It’s up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli”. Man’s power don’t end with death. We just move on to another place. A place where we go and watch over our living family”⁹¹. This declaration by Nana reveals a spiritual principle of reciprocity and a moral obligation between the living and the dead. This defies western Christian beliefs which often demonize any reverence for ancestral spirits. My assessment is that the tension between Christianity and African spirituality is also representative of the push and pull between the new world and the legacies of precolonial Africa. This tension is further exemplified in the sonic frequencies that the film score deploys through combining the drums and synth as a backing track that reappears as principles of the old and new reconcile and come together. I think it is important to interpret the film’s music as infusing the liberatory objectives of Free Jazz. As I have discussed in earlier parts of this chapter, free jazz is imbued with counter-hegemonic aesthetics and a decisive political commitment rooted in “Black Power”. Thus, the function of the drum percussions that are emphasized in Nana’s dialogue with Eli, can be said to serve as a sonic disruption to histories of coloniality and Black capture. As Nana emphasizes the importance of communing with the dead and the African ancestors, she performs a radical political function that connects her family to histories that exceed the New World and the middle passage. Therefore, the improvisational nature of the music underscored, performs a form of *flight*.

⁹¹ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

As Nana continues to teach Eli about the importance of his ancestors, the camera crosscuts back to the group of Peasant girls who appear to be in a state of trance whilst dancing and chanting.



Figure 3: Peasant grandchildren dance and play next to the beach, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

Nana's voice continues to narrate this scene as she tries to counsel Eli whom we now have come to understand is struggling to reconcile the sexual violence that Eula has endured and the uncertainty surrounding their unborn child's paternity. Nana challenges Eli to understand that:

“You won’t have no baby that wasn’t sent to you. The ancestors and the womb, they’re one, they’re the same”⁹². To heighten the weight of Nana’s words the camera zooms into a close-up shot of her face as she stares into Eli’s eyes who tries to escape both the tugging of her hand and intense gaze. The camera quickly transitions to a medium shot to reveal the great-grandfather’s tombstone and Eli who now stands over Nana’s seated figure as she continues to counsel him. As Eli unpacks his resentment for the violence that has befallen his wife, Nana reiterates that it only the ancestors who can provide him direction and protection. In sheer anger, Eli rejects the comfort of Nana saying: “This happened to my wife. My wife! I don’t feel like she mine no more”⁹³. The repetition of the words “my wife” allude to Eli’s sense of possession over Eula. This is where Dash’s Black feminist politics come at play as she conducts a grand lesson of Black women’s self-possession.

Instrumentalizing Nana’s voice to further reinforce Eula’s autonomy, Dash teaches us: “You can’t get back what you never owned. Eula never belonged to you; she married you”⁹⁴. In this back and forth between Eli and Nana, Dash vacillates between close-ups and medium shots to bring visual focus back to the gravesite as though to remind us that the conflict between Nana and Eli is also being witnessed by the ancestral spirits— who occupy the gravesite as an invisible presence that is only concretized by the imagery of the erect tombstones. It’s interesting to note that Eli feels betrayed by the old spirits and the root magic that he was taught by Nana to believe in. Commenting on these indigenous spiritual practices Eli exclaims: “We believed they would protect us... I wasn’t scared of nothing because I knew, I knew my great-grandmother had it all in

⁹² *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

⁹³ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

her pocket”⁹⁵. It is in this moment that Nana teaches Eli about his relationship to those descended Africans, the middle passage and the memory-keeping that has structured their family’s survival.

Whilst Eli and the rest of the younger generation of Peazants view their migration to the north as a sign of progress and expansion, grandma Peazant cautions that the very thing that they might be trying to abandon could just be the very thing that sustains their survival. As Nana continues to affirm the importance of communing with the ancestors, the sound of drums heightens and the camera crosscuts to the beach where the Peazant girls continue to swirl in slow-motion and fall to the ground as though they were entranced by spirits. I find this scene to be one of the most climatic as Dash employs a multitude of crosscut angles and sounds. There is a convergence of drums, ominous tribal music, the sound of children laughing, chickens clucking and metal clangs. The use of traditional west African drums in the sonic landscape of the scene becomes a form of collapsing time in that sonic African continuities rupture the present as though to reiterate that to live in the wake means to constantly have history rupture the present. As though to perform a sort of conjure with her cinematic gaze, Dash juxtaposes Nana’s teachings on ancestral memory with slow-motion shots of the Peazant girls dancing and spinning in a trance-like state. By employing several crosscut angles, Dash juxtaposes space to highlight a connection across spatial dimensions. This emphasizes that although the characters are in different physical locations, their family ties are communicated through crosscutting and matched frame composition.

Through the above scene analysis, I hope to have crystallized how Dash is able to locate Nana within Afro-diasporic traditions that view the grandmother as an institution of knowledge

⁹⁵ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

that transfers history to her family and community⁹⁶. Unlike western and capitalist frameworks which operate on ageism thus ascribing little to no value in elders, Dash instead subverts conceptions that deem elder Black women as disposable. This is a clear break away from hegemonic cinematic traditions which often frame youth and Eurocentrism within the visual schema of desirability. Thus, it is radical and indeed a form of decolonial praxis for Dash to center her narrative around a minor figure who otherwise would be rendered invisible. Nana is portrayed as a living link between the physical and the metaphysical/spiritual realm. Hence, having the scene shot at the gravesite reinforces Nana Peazant as an embodiment of her ancestral lineage. I find this scene powerful in how it beautifully alludes to the inextricable link between history and memory.

Foregrounding the use of a woman as the pivotal figure in narratives concerned with memory is able to offer the desired alternative code of truth which speaks against the grain of hegemonic discourses. The narrative portrays the fractures of familial bonds inflicted by a history that continues to haunt the present. Through the voice of Nana Peazant, the film is able to also offer insight on Eula's rape and the possibility of healing and redemption from this painful past. Furthermore, I have been able to demonstrate the ways in which Dash enacts *wake-work* as a form of decolonizing our understanding of history. The use of traditional west African drums in the sonic landscape of the film becomes a form of collapsing time in that sonic African continuities rupture the present as though to reiterate that to live in the wake means to constantly have history rupture the present. There are fleeting moments in the film where we are shown the ancestors who are no longer in the present and in these moments, the beating sound of the drums becomes heightened. Interestingly, there appears to be an absence of drums in the Unborn Child's theme.

⁹⁶ Babalwa, Magoqwana, "Repositioning uMakhulu as an Institution of Knowledge" in *Whose History Counts: Decolonising African Pre-Colonial Historiography*, edited by. Bam, June, Lungisile Ntsebeza, and Allan Zinn (Stellenbosch, South Africa: African Sun Media, 2018), 75-89.

Instead, the unborn child's music is characterized by flutes and chimes. Dash explains that this sonic structure as conceived by Barnes is:

“in the Key of B, the key of Libra, representing balance and justice— because this character was coming into the world to impart justice, a healing upon her father and mother and family. Similarly, Nana Peasant's theme is in the key of A, representing the age of Aquarius or the New Age that was imminent for Nana's family. The film's closing theme is called *Elegba* theme, and it was written in the key of Taurus. Elegba is a trickster deity from the Yoruba religion, originating from southwestern Nigeria. Barnes says that it is the key of the earth, the key ruled by love. It is about people moving forward after having been given love and dignity and now facing crossroads”.⁹⁷

Barnes expands on this saying: “In the African diaspora we all feel what each other does, whether we know the people, understand the language or know the culture or not, we all *feel* each other”⁹⁸. Thus, what Barnes is drawing our attention to here, is that the music of the film is able to have a resonance and a transcendence that aims to make audiences *feel* the Peasant's family story even as they view it. I observe this to be a testament of Black music's affective reach. By infusing astrology in the making of the music, this reveals the inextricable link between spirituality, African cosmology, and jazz.

By creating an original score to accompany these powerful visuals, I further see Dash as enacting what scholar; Saidiya Hartman cites as *critical fabulation*. This is a framework that considers the importance of the imagination as a form of countering and subverting the so-called

⁹⁷ Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*. (New York: The New Press, 1992).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

grand master narrative of History. *Daughters of the Dust* collapses history with a Capital H and instead sources from collective memory and ancestral wisdom to tell the history of the Peazant family. Again, this is reiterated in one of the final scenes when Nana blesses the family before their journey to the North.



Figure 4: Peazant family members gather in unison for their blessing ceremony performed by Nana Peazant, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

The scene opens with a long shot, and this is the first time we see all the Peazant family members in the same frame as they slowly enter the screen with their backs turned towards our gaze. Nana starts the dialogue as she contemplates her own life and imminent death. She emphasizes that whilst her life is slowly approaching finality, theirs is only beginning as they prepare to embark on their migration up North. The camera transitions to a close-up shot of Nana's face. It is significant to note that this close-up is in portraiture mode as the environment surrounding Nana is blurred out so as to make her face the focus of our gaze. Nana's role as the family matriarch is

further highlighted in that she is placed at the center of the family members who listen and gather around her.



Figure 5: Peasant family members gather around the family matriarch, Nana Peasant as she imparts wisdom, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

Furthermore, she is the only one who is dressed in an indigo-colored dress whilst the other women are adorned in white dresses. Nana exclaims “We done took old Gods and given them new names”⁹⁹. With this proclamation she slowly walks over to Viola and takes the bible from her firm grasp. The camera transitions to a close-up of her hands as she ties some herbs and roots around the enclosed bible. The camera transitions back to a long shot to draw emphasis to the entire family who watch and listen as Nana begins to impart wisdom onto them. It is noteworthy that she calls

⁹⁹ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

onto the children first to come to her and “kiss this hand full of me”¹⁰⁰. Again, the camera reveals a close-up of her “indigo stained hands”¹⁰¹ as they firmly hold the bible that she has enclosed with *roots*.



Figure 6: Nana Peasant ties roots and herbs around a bible to perform a blessing ritual, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

In various instances of the film, we are taught that the children are considered with high regard in this culture. Thus, the children and the old spirits are considered with the same level of reverence. Our gaze is directed to Viola who exclaims “Lord, have Mercy. Lord, have Mercy”¹⁰² as another Peasant woman tries to contain her to remain seated. As the camera shifts our focus back to the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Whilst this paper doesn't offer a detailed analysis of the symbolism that is represented by the indigo stained hands, it is worth mentioning that throughout the film, the visual motif of indigo stained hands is recurring. This is done to symbolize how the history of enslavement collides with the present. As a form of enacting a counter-historiography Dash employs the image of the stained hands as a way of creating a “new icon around slavery, rather than the traditional showing of whip marks or chains” (Dash, 1992: 31).

¹⁰² *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

family, we see the children and the elders oblige to Nana's instructions as they all kneel and gather in front of her as she commences to perform a ritual to bless their journey up north. As she blesses each family member she affirms: "Take me where you go, by your own strength"¹⁰³. It is at this moment that Viola fails to contain her panic as she finally stands up from her seat and screams: "It ain't right!" As some of the family members attempt to console Viola, Haagar Peazant (Nana's daughter in-law) disapprovingly shouts: "Hoodoo! Hoodoo Mess!". The camera transitions to Hagar's face in close-up as it eclipses that of Nana. This angle is able to communicate how Hagar tries to use her Christian views and judgement to eclipse the indigenous spiritual teachings of Nana. I would further assert that both Hagar and Viola in that moment are positioned as a colonizing presence that seeks to undo and suppress the African epistemologies of Black being that are represented by Nana. However, through the intervention and the embrace of Mr Snead who also joins the family in Nana's ritual, Viola too is finally transformed, and she too surrenders herself to the hands and prayers of Nana. This appears to be a moment of deep familial reconciliation and the transformation of the younger generation who finally understand the value of Nana's wisdom.

By positioning Nana Peazant as the one who blesses the family's migration journey by calling upon the spirit of the great ancestors, Dash positions the Gullah culture as a futuristic and radical technology for Black survival through the cultural practices of the Peazant women. Drawing from the work of African feminist scholar Babalwa Magoqwana and her radical teachings on repositioning the African grandmother as an institution and body of knowledge, I propose that Dash positions Nana Peazant as a futuristic figure and culture bearer. She embodies radical futurities, all the while carrying and continuing the Gullah cultures into the future. "These cultural

¹⁰³ *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1991; United States: Geechee Girls, American Playhouse, WMG Film).

practices and elements exist in the past, present, and future simultaneously, transcending temporal boundaries”¹⁰⁴. Thus, identity and family history are traced through memory, storytelling, ancestry, and myth.

Finally, I would like to highlight how Dash engages myth as a form of counter-historiography. Dash offers ‘Ibo Landing’ as a filmic space that symbolizes the diasporic link between Africa and America. As a prelude to the graveyard scene, the camera zooms into a close-up shot focusing our gaze on a wooden sculpture that looks like a corpse figure, floating on water. This is accompanied by the sound of harmonizing women singing in an unfamiliar African language. It would not be far-fetched to assume that the language is in fact fictional as this ties into the theme of myth and memory that is highlighted in this scene. The floating wooden figure is a clear visual reference to the “Ibo Landing” myth which refers to African captives of the Ibo tribe, who refused to be subjected to slavery. One account of history states that ‘Ibo Landing’ is a historical location of a mass suicide that was performed by Africans who refused the captivity of enslavement, thus they drowned themselves in front of their captors¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ Patricia Williams. *Teaching Daughters of the Dust" as a Womanist Film and the Black Arts Aesthetic of Filmmaker Julie Dash*. New edition (Suisse: Peter Lang, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*. (New York: The New Press, 1992).



Figure 7: A wooden sculpture floats in the river to evoke the myth of “Ibo Landing”, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, 1991.

Dash’s film however reworks this myth by presenting an alternative filmic reality that is in opposition to the hegemonic mythmaking of Eurocentric Western culture. Thus, as a form of subverting hegemonic accounts of the Ibo landing myth, the film claims that those who were enslaved walked into the water and then on top of the water, all the way back to Africa. Gay Wilentz offers an interesting examination of this mythic legend of flying African captives. He asserts that this myth of flight functions, “not merely as an individual or ‘universal’ symbol of transcendence, but as a collective symbol of resistance by a specific group within a socio-historical context”¹⁰⁶. As I have already contended earlier that *Daughters* offers its viewer a counter-

¹⁰⁶ Wilentz, Gay. 1989. “If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature”. *Melus*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 21–32.

historiography, I would further propose that the film's reference to 'Ibo Landing' can be read as a deliberate attempt to subvert colonial and hegemonic accounts of history, thus engaging myth and memory becomes a radical and decolonial form of liberatory practice. *Daughters of the dust* is a universe that belongs unto itself that does not translate its world and preoccupations.

Visualizing the *Wake*: Sarah Maldoror as Cinematic Griot and Decolonial Archivist

Introduction

Following suit to the tradition of synchronizing film with the aesthetic principles expressed in jazz music is Sarah Maldoror's: *Leon G Damas*. Deviating from the narrative filmic format of *Daughters of the Dust*, Maldoror offers us a documentary film in the form of a lyrical tapestry of the Negritude poet which deliberately revels on plurality rather than authoritative biography. Whilst Dash's sonic registers manifest in the form of an original sound score, Sarah Maldoror incorporates existing jazz compositions and curates a soundtrack that pulls from jazz music spanning from different parts of the African diaspora. It is through the use of this music that she frames the visual poetry of *Léon G. Damas*. I find it interesting that much of this film's aesthetic centers jazz music as an archival repository to tell the poetic story of Leon G Damas and his legacy within the Negritude Movement. The music in the film thus becomes another narrative device which is deployed to unfold Damas' personal history in the same way that an African griot would tell a story. At the first mention of nostalgia, Maldoror introduces an accompanying composition of Paul Robeson's¹⁰⁷ *There's a Man Going Round Taking Names*¹⁰⁸. As we explore

¹⁰⁷ In latter parts of this chapter, I shall further contextualize the significance of Paul Robeson in the history jazz music and its political commitments towards global Black liberation.

¹⁰⁸ This song is taken from the album entitled; *Scandalize my Name* released in the year 1955.

Damas' existential dilemma as a so-called 'transplant' and migrant, Maldoror pulls from jazz music in order to heighten feelings of sentimentality and a longing for home. Inserting the voices of young Black girls as participants in the telling of this story, Maldoror asks them about their relationship to poetry and whether they might have ever come across the poetry of Damas. To the discerning viewer, it becomes instantly evident that Maldoror's interviews in themselves become a repository for debates surrounding Black art and Black consciousness. This film could also be defined as a translation of Damas' poetry into images and sound and essentially: a visual manifesto of Négritude.

Situating Sarah Maldoror as Cinematic Griot

Since there still remains to be a cohesive and elaborate study done on Maldoror as a cultural producer and a canonical figure in global Black cinemas, I think that it is important to provide historical context for her art activism that precedes the making of the film, *Leon G Damas*. Taking lead from writer and political thinker Aimé Césaire – who is also Maldoror's friend and a subject of her documentary films – Maldoror's impact can be summed in the words that assert: "To Sarah Maldoror... who, camera in hand, fights oppression, alienation and defies human bullshit."¹⁰⁹ These words are also an important testament for situating Maldoror as belonging to the lineage of filmmakers who defined a visual grammar that upholds the political commitments of Third Cinema.

In her overview of Maldoror's cultural and cinematic impact, Yasmina Price defines Maldoror's practice of counter-history and counter-imaging as being threefold: namely, "pointing

¹⁰⁹ My friend, collaborator and interlocutor, Yasmina Price writes more on this in her article entitled; *Woman with a Weapon-Camera: On the work of Sarah Maldoror* in "The New Inquiry". August 2020 <https://thenewinquiry.com/woman-with-a-weapon-camera/>

to the already central role of women, upholding figures of Black culture who received insufficient recognition, and pushing back against institutionalized narratives that singularized struggle, to make it clear that historical change will always be made by those who are likely to remain anonymous”¹¹⁰. Perhaps as an attempt to reject nationalist ideals of identification and the construct of geographical borders, Maldoror did not claim any nationality, though she has called herself African in various interviews. In Aleksandro Silva’s study entitled: “Sarah Maldoror” in *The Atlantic Space Within Globalization*, we are directed to an instance that most clearly signals Maldoror’s boundless and perhaps complicated approach towards defining her diasporic Blackness. Here she asserts:

“I feel at home everywhere. I am from everywhere and nowhere. My ancestors were slaves. In my case, this makes things more difficult. The Antilleans accuse me of not living in the Antilles, the Africans say that I was not born on the African continent, and the French criticize me for not being like them”¹¹¹”.

Drawing from the above assertion and the diasporic sensibility demonstrated in her art activism—I see Maldoror as a true child of the African diaspora, in that her roots can be tied to several oceans. Thus, this *oceanic boundlessness* is what I perceive as her being an embodiment of the African diaspora. With this in mind, I would like to propose that we contend with Maldoror as an important agent of both European and African film history in that she reminds us of the historical and monstrous intimacies shared by these continents.

¹¹⁰ Yasmina Price writes more on this in her article entitled; *Woman with a Weapon-Camera: On the work of Sarah Maldoror* in “The New Inquiry”. August 2020 <https://thenewinquiry.com/woman-with-a-weapon-camera/>

¹¹¹ For a detailed overview, consult Aleksandro Silva, *Sarah Maldoror* in “The Atlantic Space Within Globalization”. April 2022.

Whilst Maldoror has produced dozens of films which span over various genres, I find *Leon G Damas* to be some of her most lyrical works. The film takes on the form of a documentary that is centered on Damas' poetry and life commitment to Negritude. Maria do Carmo Piçarra notes that Maldoror gained renown for rejecting more traditional documentary approaches and the direct cinema technique in favor of a signature poetic, aesthetic gaze¹¹². This is clearly demonstrated in the *Damas* film, where Maldoror sets up a dialogue between political engagement and art, imagining it through the poetry of Damas and using jazz music as an archival repository for Afro-diasporic microhistories. Notedly, Damas is affiliated with a repertoire of cultural icons whom Maldoror cinematically documents as a form of resisting the erasure that often takes place in the western canon. Pulling from jazz music that stretches across the Africa diaspora, Maldoror enacts a counter-history and draws from jazz as a sonic landscape that is conceived as “a form social change and a vehicle for community building across prescribed social lines”¹¹³.

Straddling through the weight of hegemonic history, Maldoror is able to center the idea of history as a collective endeavor that requires intimate forms of recounting and recollecting. This is demonstrated in her decision to center the film around the voices and personal testimonies of Damas' friends and comrades, namely—Negritude founder; Aimé Césaire and Senegalese poet, politician and cultural theorist Léopold Sédar Senghor. Aime Césaire was the first to coin the phrase “negritude” in his poem entitled; *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. In this poem he declares, “my negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day... [it] takes root in the ardent flesh of the soil.” Together with Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, Leon G Damas created poetry that would make a definition for Negritude. Inspired by other Black diasporic

¹¹² de Medeiros, Paulo, and Livia Apa. “Resistance and Political Awareness through the Poetic Gaze of Sarah Maldoror.” In *Contemporary Lusophone African Film*, 1st ed., 1:63–79 (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹³ Josh Kun. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

cultural production movements such as “The Harlem Renaissance” and jazz music, The Negritude Movement sought to be a response towards Black alienation and a revolution against the French colonial politics of assimilation.¹¹⁴ As demonstrated through Maldoror’s lyrical account of Leon Damas and his impact in Negritude, we get to bear witness to how the poets of the Negritude movement were involved in an ideological project that sought to answer to the questions; “who am I?, Who are we?, and What are we in this white world?”. In the film, Senghor lovingly and most poignantly distinguishes Damas as being the first poet to “live Négritude”. As though to affirm the idea that diaspora is a verb and a doing word, Senghor ultimately captures the Cosmopolitan nature of Damas—who was always in transit thus marking his writing with imagery imbued with an angst and melancholy that is strongly influenced by jazz and blues.

Maldoror interweaves the poetry of Damas by projecting it onto the screen. This is demonstrated in the first frame of the film with the translated words: *Three rivers run in my veins*. These words are adapted from the poem: “Black Label” which is Damas’s book-length poem published in 1956¹¹⁵. For any reader of diasporic sensibility, it is immediately clear that the poem signals the thematic concerns of exile and displacement, which will soon be unraveled in the film. Thus, it is rather apt for Maldoror to open the film with this poetic declaration as the words introduce readers to an exiled subject in a condition of terrible loneliness and despair. In this sense, Maldoror enlists the poetry of Damas with a performative function. I observe this filmic strategy as comparative to Dash’s in *Daughters of the Dust* whereby the film’s opening sequence unfolds through the words of poetry and voice-over. After opening the film with poetry, Maldoror

¹¹⁴ For more on what constituted *The Negritude Movement*, please consult *Return to the Kingdom of Childhood* by Thiam Cheikh (2014), *The Practice of Diaspora* by Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) and a more concise overview on *Black Past* by Anna Micklin (2008) <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/negritude-movement/>

¹¹⁵ For a comprehensive translation and analysis of this poem, read Kathleen Gyssels and Christine Pagnouille “The Négraille’s Testament: Translating Black-Label” in *Intimate Enemies*, 2017, pp. 124–40.

transitions to a medium shot of grey clouds which hover over a body of water. She then pulls from subtle horns and flutes as the sonic registers to accompany a foregrounding of Damas' brief biography and his historical and cultural relevance to the African diaspora. I think that it is significant that Maldoror keeps our gaze fixed to the image of clouds hanging over a large body of water—for close to a minute.



Figure 8: A medium shot of grey clouds hanging above a large body of water, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

I perceive this visual reference as an attempt to set the stage for a visual narrative on diaspora, oceanity, exile, displacement, and what Christina Sharpe terms as the “wake”. Similarly

to the poetic phrase: *Three rivers run in my veins*, Maldoror's visual provocation seems to connect Damas's biography and identity to the "oceans" as opposed to fixed national borders. This introduction is quickly punctuated by images of the landscapes of Guyana and the voice of the artist thus, the film exemplifies the poetic documentary form to which Maldoror frequently returned¹¹⁶. Since the film is shot in black and white, it appears that Maldoror is indeed implicating herself as being involved in a particular kind of historical project. In this sense she positions herself as an archivist and historian. In addition, by stripping the visual narrative of color, Maldoror is able to heighten the emotional impact made by the film and the accompanying sonic frequencies.

Maldoror is deliberate in terms of how she coalesces jazz music and the micro-histories of the Negritude movement. As I have mentioned earlier, Paul Robeson's music enters the frame and performs a particular form of affective function that helps the viewer to "feel" the weight of the histories that are being recuperated. The evocation of Robeson is critical in understating Maldoror's pan Africanist political commitments as Robeson was one of the jazz musicians who was instrumental in directing the attention of mainstream civil rights leaders to African struggles against colonialism¹¹⁷. Similarly to Max Roach's personal ties to African politics, "in the 1930s Robeson also became interested in African culture and politics while in London, where he met several future leaders of the African independence movement"¹¹⁸. In fact, so deeply was Robeson's commitment to strengthening these diasporic ties between African Americans and Africa, that in 1937, he co-founded the International Committee on African Affairs with the primary objective to educate the American public about Africa and facilitate the studies of African students in the

¹¹⁶ *The Legacies Of Sarah Maldoror (1929–2020): A Roundtable Discussion* from "Another Gaze". (May 2020).

¹¹⁷ See Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*, chapter four (2007: 108-111).

¹¹⁸ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.

United States¹¹⁹. Thus, by enlisting the music of Robeson, Maldoror seeks to articulate a key philosophy within Negritude, that connected to jazz music as a metaphor for Black transnational solidarity¹²⁰. For Maldoror, jazz music is where the Black diaspora converges, thus making the sound a generative repository for the articulation of Damas’s biography.



Figure 9: Aimé Césaire gives a testimony about Léon G. Damas, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

¹¹⁹ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.

¹²⁰ In *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (2014: 66), Tsitsi Jaji writes extensively on Negritude Musicology, primarily drawing from Senghor’s writings on jazz music as an expression of Negritude’s Black political aesthetics. Simultaneously, Jaji offers what often reads as a scathing critique of Senghor’s vision of negritude by dismissing his connection to jazz music as a site that allows him “to find a resonance between his own alienation as a student from the colonies in Paris, and the originary displacement of the Middle Passage for diaspora blacks” (80).

Once Maldoror's voice-over has foregrounded Damas's biography, this is soon followed by a voice-over testimony from Aimé Césaire who states that: "Damas is not an African. He is really a Negro of the Diaspora: an uprooted Negro. A transplanted Negro visited by the great memory..."¹²¹ I find this observation to be quite apt in that it immediately echoes the sentiments of the poem that is referenced at the beginning of the film. In their translation of the poem, Kathleen Gyssels and Christine Pagnouille observe that: "the poetical subject testifies to an incurable displacement and therefore dislocation of the self. He does not belong anywhere. Paris is synonymous with exile, i.e., in his case, misery, loneliness and depression, but Cayenne and his native Guyane are not places he longs for either"¹²². This analysis seems to coincide with Césaire's statement as both observations allude to Damas as being characterized by a state of restlessness that is a result of displacement. Furthermore, I see Damas's presupposed identity as a Negro of the Diaspora as coinciding with his deep connection to jazz music. Thus, he becomes somewhat synonymous to jazz as a migration song for the African diaspora and the music's ability to travel and resonate deeply across the Diaspora. Thus, it is befitting to assume that whilst the film is a biographical account of Damas, it simultaneously serves as a love letter to jazz music, which I contend for as a repository of counter-hegemonic aesthetics.

¹²¹ *Leon G Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, (1994; France: Conseil Régional de la Guyane, Motuba Films, 1995), Digital.

¹²² Gyssels, Kathleen, and Christine Pagnouille. 2017. "The Négraille's Testament: Translating Black-Label." *Intimate Enemies*, pp. 127.



Figure 10: Young Black girls speak to Sarah Maldoror about their knowledge of poetry, *Léon G.*

Damas, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

As though to connect jazz music's function to the poetry of Damas, Maldoror furnishes the next scene with a street interview where she quizzes young Black girls on their relationship to poetry. The simple question: "which poets do you like?" becomes a site of contestation whereby Maldoror stages a critique of western hegemony in the literary canon. This is unveiled by the young girls' mention of French canonical figures such as Victor Hugo, La Fontaine, and no mention of Damas nor any other Guianese poets. In this scene, Maldoror retreats from the sound of jazz music and instead leans into atmospheric sounds of cars driving by and the surrounding chatter of the people on the streets. Whilst the girls being interviewed continue to engage her

questions, Maldoror simultaneously directs our gaze to her surroundings in the form of a 360 shot. What is revealed by Maldoror's gaze is a sense of curiosity and genuine interest in the mundane. The camera cuts to a man operating a sanding machine, then we see a woman walking pass a building with walls that are filled with street graffiti and a man riding a bike—among a plethora of other ordinary images of the everyday. What these cut away images seem to reinforce is the simplicity of witnessing everyday Black people as they go about their daily enactments of the quotidian. In hegemonic cinematic practices, Blackness is often pathologized and spectacularized therefore, Maldoror's over-inscription of the quotidian is a gentle nudge towards Black interiority and the rediscovery of the ordinary¹²³. As asserted by Njabulo Ndebele in order for Black storytellers to counter the history of the representation of spectacle and the spectacle of excess, “the ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions”¹²⁴. This is further exemplified in Saidiya Hartman's teachings on recovering minor figures as a technique of reading and writing history¹²⁵.

Moreover, I think it is both profound and revealing that Maldoror chooses to feature the voices of ordinary Black girls in what is clearly a political statement on Black Art and Black consciousness. The clear erasure of Guianese poetry from the school curriculum of these Black children mimics the white-washing of jazz music's history. As though to offer a sonic disruption to this erasure, Maldoror's voice interjects with sporadic recitals of poetry that are an obvious critique of French and western hegemonic cultural practices. In this scene, the poem reads:

¹²³ See Njabulo Ndebele, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1986, pp. 143–57.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 156.

¹²⁵ Saidiya V Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 33.

“My mother expected a memorandum son.

If your history lesson is not learnt

you will not go to mass on Sunday in your Sunday best.

This child will bring shame on our name.

This child will be our swear word.

Be quiet! Did I tell you or not to speak French? The French of France. The French of France. French French”¹²⁶.

In the above poem, Maldoror tackles the violence imposed by French cultural dominance. Therefore, what I deduce from the poem is a critique of the hegemonic function of history, religion, and language. The decisive nature of these anti-colonial themes are compatible with the ideological concerns of negritude. Most noteworthy is how the last two lines offer repetition in order to draw special focus to the colonial function of the French language. This is a theme that Maldoror explores again in her 1981 film entitled *Dessert for Constance*¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ *Leon G Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, (1994; France: Conseil Régional de la Guyane, Motuba Films, 1995), Digital.

¹²⁷ *Dessert for Constance/ Un dessert pour Constance*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, (1981; France: Top Films, Antenna 2 France, 1981), Television.

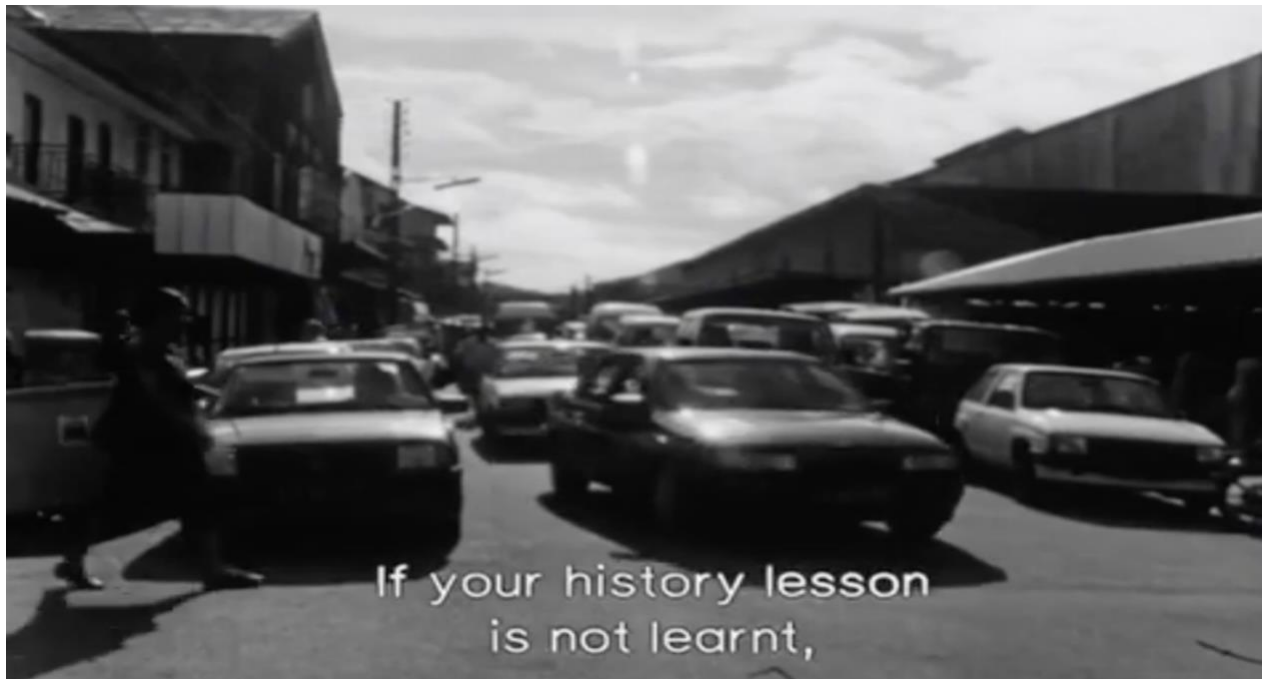


Figure 11, A medium shot of a woman crossing the street in front of car traffic, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.



Figure 12: A close up shot of hands of women buying from street vendors, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

The abovementioned poetic interlude is accompanied by images of Black people performing mundane tasks such as crossing the streets and bartering with street vendors. Again, Maldoror enacts a gaze that is concerned with quotidian forms of Black life, highlighting the Black working class as significant agents of history. This poetic inscription of ordinary and mundane Blackness becomes a form of returning the gaze—a rediscovery of the ordinary.

Thereafter, Maldoror shifts our gaze back to Césaire and this time around, she is careful to reinscribe the sound of soft jazz horns and the saxophone. Through this enactment of *ingoma*, Maldoror cedes ideological power to Césaire who describes Damas’ poetry as being marked by “an existential Negro anguish”. Here, Césaire positions Damas as being equally shaped by West Indian sensibilities and those of the New World. The camera transitions back to the visual motif of water, as though to correlate jazz music as a form of *wake work*.



Figure 13: A close-up shot of still river water, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

Soon the frame is heightened by a deep sense of nostalgia and the type of melancholy that can only be intimately known by those who have been “uprooted from home”. As though to offer an antidote to the anguish that is caused by displacement, Maldoror introduces Senghor into the conversation. It appears however in this instance, that Senghor is positioned as a visual representation of Africa and thus a stabilizing presence to “the uprooted negro”. Césaire confirms this romanticism as he shares how Africa represented a form of Nostalgia for him and Damas. He further observes Senghor as being distinguished by an air of what he calls “great serenity”, which he attributes to the fact that Senghor is African and hence not uprooted. Evidently, this reductive thinking serves

as proof for some of the overarching criticisms of Negritude and their over-romanticization of Africa. The “Mother Africa” trope seems to overstate the idea of return which inaccurately presumes that African cultures are stagnant and unchanging. This idea seems to conveniently ignore how African colonialism similarly functioned to destabilize and eradicate indigenous beliefs and cultural practices. Thus, a rigorous definition of diaspora ought to acknowledge that there are edgeless connections between Africans who have were enslaved and those who were colonized.



Figure 14: A medium shot of a river surrounded by trees, *Léon G. Damas*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, 1995.

Maldoror seemingly addresses the canonical erasure of Damas's literature through sporadic inscriptions of his poetry that render it as a performative speech act. In this instance, she incorporates archival audio of Damas reading one of his poems entitled: *Blues (Limbé)*¹²⁸. It is significant that she retreats from her function as narrator and instead cedes authorial power to Damas by centering his own voice in the reading of his poetry. As Damas' voice is projected on screen, Maldoror directs our gaze to Guiana's contemporary landscape with a special focus to "quiet"¹²⁹ images such as a bird pecking at straw, the sight of bees and a 360 angle of a forest. It is at this moment that Maldoror enlists the sonic world of Geoffrey Oryema through the song: *Makambo*¹³⁰ which was released in 1990 from his debut album entitled: *Exile*. I find the inclusion of Geoffrey's music to be a migration poem unto itself as the song *Makambo* charges the visual poetry of Maldoror with immediate feelings of angst and sorrow. Upon encountering this song, I felt a pull towards Oryema and discovered that the song *Makambo*, in fact, "relates the pain that people go through when left with no other choice but to leave their motherland"¹³¹ Whilst there is very little information written about Oryema outside of fragmented liner notes found online, I was able to gather that a part of his success was in his ability to transmute the existential melancholy of exile through his vocal prowess. It is significant that Maldoror chooses to enlist the music of Oryema in order to expound on the themes of exile, memory and displacement. In *Makambo*, Oryema relays his experience as a Ugandan who was displaced and exiled to Paris. Due to "his father, Erinayo Wilson Oryema, a cabinet minister who was brutally murdered in unclear

¹²⁸ Léon-Gontran Damas. 1972. *Pigments Névralgies*. [1st electronic ed.]. Paris: Présence africaine.

¹²⁹ This refers to images that exhibit "sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of Black communities. (Tina Campt, 2017).

¹³⁰ Oryema, Geoffrey, "Makambo". *Exile*. Real World Records. 1990. CD.

¹³¹ Ayub Ogada, "Liner Notes", *Real Worlds Records*. 16 May 1993. <https://realworldrecords.com/releases/exile/>

circumstances in 1977, at the age of 24, Geoffrey was forced to flee Uganda in the middle of the night. He spent four hours in the trunk of a car until he crossed the border to safety in Kenya”¹³². Thereafter, he was exiled to Paris where he settled for forty years. This traumatic experience influences the prevalent themes of alienation and exile which are heavily addressed in his debut album. It appears that Oryema’s pain of being forced to leave his motherland is synonymous to the existential anguish that Césaire speaks of when he recalls Damas as an uprooted Negro. Similarly to the political activism of Max Roach and Paul Robeson, Geoffrey Oryema used his music to address the Ugandan military government of the time: calling for peace and an end to armed struggle. Whilst Oryema’s sonic grammar escapes the bounds of traditional jazz, his style of music has been described as: “a harmonious marriage between traditional and Western influences”¹³³. This is noteworthy as it gestures towards the condition of being uprooted, whereby one must continuously straddle both belonging and unbelonging to their exiled location and their motherland.

Maldoror’s gaze redirects our focus back to the track of the water as Césaire interjects with a description of Damas’ poetry stating that “the tone was precisely that of the blues”. Therefore, by crosscutting between the visual of water and Césaire’s description of Damas’ poetry as musical, Maldoror enacts a form of oceanic aesthetics that conflate jazz and the blues with anticolonial poetry and visuals of the mundane. Maldoror has a knack for capturing the quotidian and the Black mundane. Whilst traditional scholars spend many words trying to philosophize how to do away with spectacular portrayals of Blackness, Maldoror mobilizes her cinematic gaze towards capturing nature, at times nudging us to simply bear witness to the stillness of clouds, water, and

¹³² Oran Mullan, “Geoffrey Oryema, 1953-2018”. *Real World Records*. 24 June 2018. <https://realworldrecords.com/news/geoffrey-oryema-1953-2018/>

¹³³ Ibid.

the trees. Whilst the visuals are shot in black and white, Maldoror conjures an audiovisual poem charged with the beauty, alienation, and the melancholy of a blues song. I think that this is the aesthetic that the likes of Arthur Jafa have spent years in the attempt to capture.

I observe Maldoror's inclusion of music and this soundtrack to African diasporic Jazz as a lesson in music history and politics, particularly in moments when we encounter the sounds of Paul Robeson who was more than a musician but also a political activist. By evoking Robeson, Maldoror is further able to illustrate the practice of diaspora and her own political investments in Pan Africanism. I say this because as Monson writes: "in the 1930s Robeson became interested in African culture and politics while in London, where he met several future leaders of the African independence movement, including Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, and Nigerians Nnamdi Azikiwe and K. O. Mbadiwe"¹³⁴. Based on the politicization of musicians such as Paul Robeson, one can deduce that the inclusion of his music functions as "a scaffolding on which a story of raised consciousness and liberation could be constructed and also as a musical manifestation of those revolutionary goals"¹³⁵. This is also highlighted in the inclusion of music by "Sweet" Emma Barrett who was an early jazz pianist and vocalist from New Orleans. By enlisting the sounds of "Sweet Emma and Her Preservation Hall Jazz Band" which was recorded live in 1964, Maldoror further makes a Black feminist intervention in the history of jazz—by subtly recuperating "Sweet" Emma as a trailblazer among women in jazz history¹³⁶.

¹³⁴ Ingrid T. Monson. *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.

¹³⁵ Woolsey, Morgan. 2015. "Re/Soundings: Music and the Political Goals of the L.A. Rebellion". in *L.A. Rebellion*, 1st ed., pp. 183. University of California Press.

¹³⁶ Pais, Noah Bonaparte. "PRESERVATION HALL: THE NEXT 50 YEARS." *Gambit Weekly*, vol. 32, no. 23, 2011.

Concluding Thoughts

As a final consideration, I assert that Maldoror, similarly to Dash galvanizes jazz music as a musical manifestation of the revolutionary goals of Negritude. Thus, Maldoror effectively translates Césaire's musings on how the experience of the transplant or those who are uprooted is always marked by a sense of romantic nostalgia. In the above meditation I have proven how Maldoror uses music to enact a rigorous engagement of living Blackness in the diaspora. By positioning Damas as someone who embodied and lived Negritude as opposed to theorizing on it the film reiterates the idea of diaspora being a verb and ultimately being determined by how one lives and moves through the world. Moreover, Maldoror seems to continuously bring attention to how Damas's poetry is able to enact the same kind of spontaneity that is found in jazz music.

To affirm that Damas's poetry comes from a spontaneous place ultimately points us in the direction of jazz music and how the music is fostered by improvisation. To be uprooted and displaced quickly assumes a way of moving through the world by navigating a series of catastrophic events. Thus, I posit that the improvisational nature of both jazz music and Damas' poetry teach us that for Blackness to survive catastrophe and crisis, this demands the ability to be fluid and spontaneous. As Maldoror uses jazz music as a queer resource for decolonial histories, she further demonstrates the use of memory as emotional time. In her insistence on visualizing the everyday and the quotidian in the recollection of the microhistories within the grand Negritude movement, Maldoror's gaze is able to prioritize the 'interiority of existence' which effectively becomes a powerful way of engaging history and carving in the Black voice beyond the marginality of silencing racial politics. African scholar and writer Njabulo Ndelebe who calls African artists towards the rediscovery of the ordinary echoes this very sentiment and asserts: "The ordinary is defined as the opposite of the spectacular. The ordinary is sobering rationality; it is the

forcing of attention on necessary detail. Paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness”¹³⁷. Essentially, what is implicit in Maldoror’s call towards the ordinary is a critique of the masculinist forms of Third Cinema¹³⁸ and their gender-coded affinity for the “public”, the Grande and the spectacular. Following suit to this Black feminist tradition of counter-history, the next chapter of this dissertation focuses its attention on the filmic work of South African filmmaker, Xoliswa Sithole and the critical interventions posed by her film: *Standing on their Shoulders*¹³⁹.

¹³⁷ Njabulo S. Ndebele. “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” in *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 12 (2): 1986: 143–57.

¹³⁸ Here, I am proposing that Maldoror’s filmic project similarly to Dash, can be said to be in the lineage of Third Cinema and its ideological preoccupations.

¹³⁹ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

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<https://fatherlandgazette.com/the-bata-drum/>

CHAPTER TWO

Visualizing *Herstories*: Mapping Cinematic Representations of Black Feminist Movements



Figure 15: Black women at the 1956 Women's March, upholding demonstration boards in protest against Pass Laws, *South African History Online*,

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1956-womens-march-pretoria-9-august>

“We are supposed to actually contest the erasure of women out of history. We’re supposed to fight that. When I thought of making this film, it was to celebrate the 1956 Women’s March in Pretoria. Because, as you know, men were already

carrying passes and the law was now wanting to force women to carry passes. And women organized. 20,000 women marched to Union Buildings, and they said, ‘No, we are not.’ And they never carried passes. But, in making this film, the most disappointing thing for me was that there’s nothing on women in terms of archives, in terms of recorded stories. It was just really, really difficult to get that information. Also, what was interesting for me was to research how the 1956 Women’s March created a domino effect where Black women in this country ended up continuously fighting, right up until the 2015 #FeesMustFall movement, which had a lot of women in the forefront” (Xoliswa Sithole in *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*, 2023:139)¹⁴⁰.

Setting the Scene

I will begin by admitting that this chapter has been the hardest for me to write. For how do we begin to address a historical wound that is still bleeding and unfolding monstrous afterlives? How do we heal these histories that continue to rupture the *wake*¹⁴¹ of Black being? Black feminist historian Jessica Millward contends that “the history of Black women is a long study in

¹⁴⁰ For more on the Women’s March in and women’s anti-pass campaigns, see F. Baard as told to B. Schreiner, *My Spirit is not Banned* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986); I. Berger, ‘Generations of Struggle: Trade Unions and the Roots of Feminism, 1930—60’, in N. Gasa, ed., *Women in South African History* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 185—206; N. Gasa, ‘Feminisms, Motherisms, Patriarchies and Women’s Voices in the 1950s’, in Gasa, *Women in South African History*, 207—229; H. Joseph, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph* (Johannesburg: AD Donker, 1986); Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*; J. Wells, *We Now Demand! The History of Women’s Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993).

¹⁴¹ In earlier parts of this dissertation, I have provided a theoretical foregrounding of the “wake” as a Black feminist conceptual framework that understands history as an ongoing event that continues to rupture the present. Christina Sharpe frames diasporic Black being as a state of consciousness perpetually confronted by the afterlives of slavery of various forms of coloniality (*In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Thus for the purposes of this chapter, I deploy the term in order to highlight the stakes of Xoliswa Sithole’s film as a living archive that contests and counters the wake of Black women’s archival erasure.

mourning”¹⁴². However, she provides us with a framework and a methodology that she terms “soul-care”—as an effective means of contending with the emotional labor of playing within the folds of history. To this end, she affirms that “[Black] women historians carry the energy of previous generations. Some of this energy is negative; some of it is benign; and some of it is pure inspiration. It is nearly impossible to be a Black female scholar writing about history without feeling grief for all the ancestors”¹⁴³. Thus, to resuscitate the voices of the Black women in Xoliswa Sithole’s film, *Standing on their Shoulders*¹⁴⁴, requires a form of soul-care and curatorial care. I am intimately a part of the history I am theorizing, thus I walk into this ideological battlefield already armed. My engagement with the chosen filmic text is multifold—I understand the stakes of Sithole’s project through the lens of an artist-scholar. I too, am one of the student activists who partook in the 2015 “Fees Must Fall”¹⁴⁵ movement—a historical moment that would have never been possible without the Women’s March of 1956.

Introduction

Often, cinematic representations of Black liberation movements are taken as sources of historical information however, Black women’s activism remains scantily represented in cinemas across the African diaspora. In the paradigm of South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement, historical

¹⁴² Jessica Millward, “Black Women’s History and the Labor of Mourning” in *Souls (Boulder, Colo.)* 18 (1): 161–65. pp.162.

¹⁴³ Jessica Millward, “Black Women’s History and the Labor of Mourning” in *Souls (Boulder, Colo.)* 18 (1): 161–65. pp.163.

¹⁴⁴ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

¹⁴⁵ In latter parts of this chapter, I provide more definitional and theoretical context of the “Fees Must Fall” movement as Sithole’s film frames it as a continuum of the 1956 Women’s March.

accounts continue to center heteropatriarchal figures whilst simultaneously erasing the fundamental role played by Black women. “Although women’s activism in the struggle against apartheid¹⁴⁶ was long, extensive, and multi-faceted, the 1956 Women’s March is frequently cited as a benchmark moment to provide evidence of the depth and breadth of women’s involvement”¹⁴⁷. As a testament of this, this chapter offers an intimate meditation on Xoliswa Sithole’s¹⁴⁸ film entitled, *Standing on their Shoulders*. Through the form of interviews, living testimonies and powerful archival footage, *Standing on their Shoulders* weaves a story of the women who fought for change in apartheid South Africa thus reconstructing the corrosive legacies of colonial governance.

There is something to be said about how Black women offer new possibilities for how we imagine resistance. Thus, I postulate that the chosen film serves as a revolutionary and decolonial visual archive due to the ways in which the normative apartheid histories of Black resistance are challenged and subsequently refused. By privileging the cinematic gaze of a Black woman filmmaker, this chapter echoes the prevailing thematic concerns of the entire dissertation project which are ultimately preoccupied with the articulation of a liberatory and decolonial Black feminist aesthetic. Therefore, I am invested in the potentiality of what I observe as the forms of Black feminist *refusal* that are enacted in the chosen film. In the text *The Visual Frequency of Black Life:*

¹⁴⁶ Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed in South Africa and South-West Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s.

¹⁴⁷ Kim Miller, “Selective Silence and the Shaping of Memory in Post-Apartheid Visual Culture: The Case of the Monument to the Women of South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 63 (2), (2011): 295-317. pp. 296

¹⁴⁸ Xoliswa Sithole is a South African award-winning producer and director whose films often focus on women and children, justice, human rights and class inequality. Her filmic works range from *A Ribbon in the Sky* (2002), *Projek Mandela* (2009) and *Orphans of Nkandla* (2005), for which she won her first BAFTA and an International Emmy nomination. Her documentary *Zimbabwe’s Forgotten Children* (2010) has also won Peabody and BAFTA awards. Sithole is also the producer and director of *Child of the Revolution* (2016).

Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal, Tina Campt defines the practice of refusal as “a rejection of the status quo as livable. It is a refusal to recognize a social order that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible. It is a refusal to embrace the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented and to use negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise. The practice of refusal is a striving to create possibility in the face of negation”¹⁴⁹.

Taking Campt’s provocation into consideration, I frame Sithole’s film as a radical attempt to refuse the terms imposed by the colonial and apartheid aesthetic contract that has subdued Black women’s histories. Furthermore, *Standing on their Shoulders* shall be examined as a case study because it is illustrative of a broader trend in African screen media that emphasizes the political and pedagogical responsibility of African film authors. It is deliberate that I have chosen to center the filmic work of an independent filmmaker because such works are often abandoned and left to fall into obscurity, never to be referenced as legitimate sources of history and even more so as archival repositories. Thus, what underscores the ideological concerns of this project is unearthing Black feminist epistemologies and positioning films created by Black women as radical and decolonial visual archives.

Xoliswa Sithole and Black Feminist Counter-Histories

Whilst the practice of telling stories through documentary has been a dominant mode among African women, it is important to note that very few film scholars engage these productions with

¹⁴⁹ Tina Campt. “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal.” *Social Text* 37 (3): 25–46. 2019. pp. 25.

serious intellectual consideration. South African scholars such as Jacqueline Marie Maingard¹⁵⁰ and Taryn da Canha¹⁵¹ have offered comprehensive research on the history of South African Documentary Film from a lens that interrogates apartheid and the function of race. However, these studies are limited to an analysis of the history of socio-political documentary filmmaking in South Africa without particularly interrogating how Black women restructure the form and genre of documentary by subverting the racial and gender hegemonic practices of filmmaking. In her preceding study of anti-apartheid documentary, Maingard is careful to note that the “documentary ‘movement’ in South Africa has not developed in a linear, homogeneous way that can be easily categorized, but rather has formed around diverse trends that relate to a number of variables: aesthetics and style, content, censorship, the states of emergency, funding and distribution, audiences, equipment and technical resources, education and training, networking, the film and broadcasting industry, and access to screening and broadcasting outlets both locally and internationally”¹⁵². In a more contemporary study, Feminist Film Studies scholar Kelly Kankin¹⁵³ offers a new genre of documentary that privileges the voices and experiences of women directors. Here she suggests that these documentaries function as important activist texts in women’s studies and media studies.

¹⁵⁰ Jacqueline Maingard. *Strategies of Representation in South African Anti-Apartheid Documentary Film and Video from 1976 to 1995*. (University of the Witwatersrand, 1998).

¹⁵¹ Taryn Da Canha, *Redefining the Griot: A History of South African Documentary Film*. Dissertation in Department of Historical Studies. University of Cape Town. 2002

¹⁵²Jacqueline Maingard. “Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity.” *Journal of Southern African Studies*. (1995): 657–67. p. 658.

¹⁵³Kelly Hankin. “And Introducing... the Female Director: Documentaries about Women Filmmakers as Feminist Activism.” *NWSA Journal*. (2007): 59–88.

Consequently, it is of little surprise that there is currently no comprehensive academic study that has looked towards Xoliswa Sithole's filmic work as a manifestation of Black feminist archival practice. Filmmaker and scholar Beti Ellerson¹⁵⁴ has been able to carve out a space of intellectual inquiry that has been able to prove that African women documentarians function as cultural producers who significantly contribute to Africa's intangible cultural heritage. Given the contentious historical debates on what constitutes the documentary film, my scope of inquiry seeks to deliberately disentangle itself from any traditions that overstate genre as I perceive this to be another function of coloniality. More recently the documentary film has been defined as a representation of the historical world¹⁵⁵ or as "a discursive screen onto which a society's fears and hopes are projected"¹⁵⁶.

In *Contemporary Documentary Film and "Archive Fever": History, the Fragment, the Joke*, Jaimie Baron observes that:

"Documentary film has long been enmeshed in a complex relationship with archives and archival practices. While many documentary filmmakers have drawn on archival materials—whether film footage, photographs, or other artifacts, others have radically eschewed archives and relied only on their own footage. For the most part, however, documentary filmmakers rely on a combination of archival materials

¹⁵⁴ Beti Ellerson, "African Women and the Documentary: Storytelling, Visualizing History, from the Personal to the Political". *Black Camera: The Newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives*. (2016): 223–39, p. 223. Also see Ellerson. *Sisters of the Screen: Women of Africa on Film, Video, and Television*. Trenton, (NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).

¹⁵⁵ See Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁶ Belinda Smail. *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture*. 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 139.

and their own contemporary footage, creating heterogeneous texts that oscillate in their relationship to present and past, made and found”¹⁵⁷.

Using the above observation as a point of departure, this chapter echoes the idea that since documentary is concerned with historical inquiry, it is indeed productive that we locate documentary practice within the broader historiographic context¹⁵⁸. Whilst Baron is able to accurately reveal that little has been written about the relationship between documentary as a historiographic process, I would like to complicate this idea further by positioning Sithole’s documentary as a decolonial visual archive. In *Standing on their Shoulders*, the historical past is mediated through the technology of memory and ancestral wisdom. Sithole, like many other Black women creatives and scholars, draws from the realm of the spiritual to help guide and facilitate her creative practice. For instance, she makes plain of the fact that with each new filmic project she undertakes she always visits her mother’s grave in the Transkei and asks her for wisdom and guidance¹⁵⁹. She further expands on this stating that; “When I work, it’s a very spiritual process. I honestly actually go to my parents’ graves. I burn some herbs. I speak to my ancestors”¹⁶⁰.

In addition to mobilizing this form of spiritual guidance, Sithole also cedes ideological power to women scholars and activists who offer intimate testimonies of the historical events they are providing commentary on. This method of heterogeneity clearly steers away from orthodox forms of documentary that often narrate and explain history as a straightforward recovery of “the

¹⁵⁷ Jamie Baron, “Contemporary Documentary Film and ‘Archive Fever’: History, the Fragment, the Joke.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 60 (1): 2007, 13–24. p.13-14

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Sarah Manyika, *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*. 1st ed. (New York: Footnote Press Ltd, 2023), 130.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 143.

facts” through a singular “authoritative” voice. Instead, Sithole’s decolonial enactment of counter-history is dispersed and non-linear. It foregrounds process, digression, and discovery by refusing to assert a stable narrative of the past. Due to the particularity of the sociopolitical contexts arrogated by this project, I argue that whilst Sithole pulls from the aesthetic conventions of documentary film we instead ought to understand and engage her film as a visual archive centered on Black feminist resistance and activism in South Africa.

To understand contemporary film culture in South Africa, one must first understand the country’s history of apartheid as this provides context for the significance of Xoliswa Sithole’s cinematic practice as a form of decolonial archive and *wake-work*¹⁶¹. Thus, given the calamity of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid afterlives, it is of no surprise that the country’s film industry continues to be marred by socio-economic disparities that make it particularly difficult for Black women filmmakers to not only enter the market but to also thrive in said market. The South African film industry has historically excluded the country’s Black majority, in both representation and production. These are the conditions that we ought to factor in when we are analyzing the filmic work of Xoliswa Sithole. She is creating under hostile conditions—challenged by the systemic odds of racism, patriarchy, and classism.

Thus, in the contemplation of the chosen filmic case study, we ought to approach Sithole’s cinema as a manifestation of a counter cultural history. In their study entitled: *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa*—Ntongela Masilela and Isabel Balseiro aptly contend that;

¹⁶¹ In the chapter discussing the filmic works of Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror, I contextualize wake-work as the enactment of decolonial aesthetics and what Christina Sharpe (2016) defines as a form of intracommunal Black care ethic.

“White nationalism—Afrikaner¹⁶² and British alike—has indeed debilitated filmic practice in the country from its inception by firmly grounding its ideological perspective in ethnocentrism”¹⁶³. Extending this observation even further towards a consideration of gender and sexuality, Masilela and Balseiro affirm that:

“The transition into democracy signals a shift from an emphasis on racial politics in South African film criticism. Questions of sexuality, for example, become foremost political questions and can no longer be ignored. Under the new dispensation, women’s and [queer] rights have been institutionalized in the constitution. This alone politicizes gender issues. The constitution openly acknowledges that both groups South Africa have in the past been treated differentially, and that in this differential treatment, Black women experienced apartheid policies and laws at their worst. Filmmakers now must take up the challenge and the initiative to demonstrate how Black women are marginalized by and suffer under both white rule and discriminatory treatment at the hands of Black men themselves”¹⁶⁴.

With the above observation in mind, one must contend with the stakes of Sithole’s role as an independent Black woman filmmaker who is actively wrestling against the erasure of the apartheid archive. By working within a visual medium such as film, Sithole is able to disrupt the

¹⁶² Afrikaners are a South African ethnic group descended from predominantly Dutch settlers first arriving at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652.

¹⁶³ Balseiro, I. and N. Masilela, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

technological apparatus and the potential it holds as a cohesive agent that documents and reflects the changing landscape of post-apartheid South Africa¹⁶⁵.

Perhaps what I find most compelling about Sithole is that she remains abundantly clear on her ideological mission as a filmmaker. Working in concert with the likes of Sarah Maldoror and a plethora of other African women filmmakers, Sithole is careful to incorporate the lens of class politics alongside race and gender. She exclaims, “I’ve never been interested in being part of the bourgeoisie class, never wanted to be part of the [B]lack bourgeoisie. I am working class. I am middle class by virtue of my education, by virtue of the access that I have, and the world that I can inhabit, should I choose to. But my desire is to find a way of demystifying film. My desire is to find a way to ensure that film does not remain in the domain of the bourgeoisie”¹⁶⁶. Such a statement leans itself towards a clear mission of decolonizing film and subverting its foundational sensibilities of racial capitalism.

When asked about her thoughts and feelings behind receiving the prestigious BAFTA (British Association of Film and Television) award for her 2004 film *Orphans of Nkandla*, Sithole responds by saying: “it means nothing if I’m not visible to those young [B]lack women who one day want to be filmmakers. It means nothing. This is what I am grappling with—the invisibility of Black women”¹⁶⁷. The above statement speaks directly not only to Sithole’s artistic mission statement but the greater ideological work and Black feminist labor that is being performed by all the visual makers that are explored in this dissertation project.

¹⁶⁵ Haseenah Ebrahim and Jodarcy Ellapen, “Close-Up: South African Cinema: Cinema in Post-apartheid South Africa: New Perspectives.” *Black Camera: The Newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives* 9 (2), 2018: 169–76, 170.

¹⁶⁶ Xoliswa Sithole in Thomas McCluskey, *The Devil You Dance with: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 211.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 214.

The work of challenging and countering invisibility is difficult work. Consequently, Sithole similarly to Zanele Muholi, Julie Dash and Sarah Maldoror challenges us to think differently about the labor required by forms of Black feminist visibility. Further expanding on her motivation behind a Black feminist filmic practice, Sithole asserts:

“I just think that there is no agency in society—especially a society which is actually very misogynist and globally patriarchal—there is no agency to actually make stories about women that have resonance. Being a documentary filmmaker, you are bearing witness. You are recording and bearing witness. It makes sense for me, as a woman filmmaker, to make films around such topics”¹⁶⁸.

It is crucial to note how Sithole defines the work of a documentary filmmaker as that of bearing witness. I observe this to be a powerful intervention that disrupts the traditions of documentary film in that the notion of “bearing witness” nudges us towards Sithole’s own self-reflexivity and potential critique of the ethnographic ‘othering’ gaze that is often (re)produced by documentary visual arts. As asserted by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, “if we live in a situation where the image of the world is itself colonized, then it becomes difficult for us to realize ourselves unless we struggle to decolonize that image. Decolonization of the mind is both a prerequisite for successful African cinema and it is also the object of serious African Cinema”¹⁶⁹.

Xoliswa’s cinematic gaze is indeed an active attempt to enact decolonization. She asks the audience to listen to the voices of women, particularly Black women and essentially compare and contrast these voices with normative accounts of history. This is a practice that is bound to have

¹⁶⁸ Sarah Manyika, *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*. 1st ed. (New York: Footnote Press Ltd, 2023), 131.

¹⁶⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1986), 95.

audiences grapple with the emphatic silences that have pervaded hegemonic representations of the South African anti-apartheid movement. To subvert heteropatriarchal accounts of apartheid and histories of resistance, Sithole offers a powerful testimony that bears witness to the radicality and leadership that has always been enacted by Black women activists.

‘Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo’—You Strike the Women, you Strike the Rock¹⁷⁰: **On the South African Women’s March and Black Feminist Refusal**

On the 9th of August 1956 a group of over 20,000 women from across South Africa participated in one of the most pivotal political events in anti-apartheid history. On this day, women from different parts of the country gathered in unison to protest the apartheid government’s proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act. This legislation aimed to extend the existing pass laws to Black women, with the intention to “tighten up the control of movement of African women”¹⁷¹. Reflecting on the significance of this day and the political aftermath of contemporary women’s resistance, *Standing on their Shoulders* demonstrates Black women’s vital role in the overthrow of the apartheid state—a historical fact that “has been sorely neglected in favor of a more monolithic representation of the liberation movement”¹⁷².

The establishing shot of the film subtly displays an intimate link between the sonic and the visual. This is the enactment of *ingoma*. The gentle hum of the music is accompanied by the

¹⁷⁰ These words are from the famous resistance song that was chanted by the women during the 1956 Women’s march against “Pass Laws”. They have come to symbolize the courage and strength expressed at the Women’s March of 1956 as South African women refused to give into increasing oppression without some form of protest.

¹⁷¹ Kim Miller, “Selective Silence and the Shaping of Memory in Post-Apartheid Visual Culture: The Case of the Monument to the Women of South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 63 (2), (2011): 295-317. pp. 296

¹⁷² Annie Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 107.

sound of birds chirping—as though to ground us into the mundane and the ordinary¹⁷³ of Black being even as political upheaval and catastrophe unravels in the background. The music enters the frame before the central action shot inundates the viewer with scores of Black people singing and rallying in protest. This intermingling between the vibration, frequency, and sonic tonality of Black visual production is compatible with what Tina Campt defines as Black visual artists’ ability to recreate the “visual archive of Black precarity in new and transformative ways”¹⁷⁴. Thus, by structuring a visual archive that also pulls from the sonic registers, Sithole is able to “synchronize the sonic with the visual to forge a modality capable of reckoning with the full complexity of Black life”¹⁷⁵.

In the form of exploded chronology, Sithole’s cinematic gaze doesn’t begin in 1956, instead we are transfixed in present day South Africa, with workers and students taking to the streets of Johannesburg to protest in solidarity. Through the form of a long shot, Sithole draws our attention to a placard that reads: “Workers and Students Unite”. This is significant as it reveals how Black liberation movements in South Africa have historically had strong Marxist¹⁷⁶ leanings. As I shall demonstrate in the subsequent parts of this chapter, more contemporary examples of

¹⁷³ As asserted by scholar and author, Njabulo Ndebele (1988), South African storytellers ought to lean towards the mundane and the ordinary as a means of doing away with the notion of the “spectacular”. Sithole is careful to not reproduce the violence of the histories that she is visually confronting. Thus, it is significant that the establishing shot in the film, opens with soft music and the sound of birds chirping.

¹⁷⁴ Tina Campt. “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal.” *Social Text* 37 (3): 25–46. (2019): 27

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Whilst this chapter is primarily concerned with visual histories of Black feminist resistance, it would be amiss to offer any contextual discussion of apartheid without a direct engagement with racial capitalism and class politics. Thus, Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983) serves as instructive in efforts to understand not only apartheid South Africa but Black people’s history of resistance in the diaspora. Afterall, apartheid was a policy that was fundamentally rooted in racial capitalism. Furthermore, it is important to note that the very term “racial capitalism” emerged in debates on the South African Left in the 1970s and Robinson’s text served as a response to these debates with the attempt of moving the understanding of the term beyond apartheid South Africa.

student led movements have highlighted the importance of forging stronger solidarity across class lines. Thus, political participation and resistance is not only reserved for the elite or the politically astute. Professor of Political Studies Shireen Hassim is the first speaker to enter the frame asserting: “When you think about the history of how change happens—there have to be these moments of disruption of the accepted ways of thinking and speaking”. In the next frame, we bear witness to protestors chanting and *toyi-toying*¹⁷⁷ around a burning tyre. Whilst the scene is set in contemporary South Africa, the visual codes deployed symbolize the history of apartheid and the specific forms of protest (in the form of music and dance) that were used by Black South Africans. I see this visual signaling as an intergenerational call and response. Afterall, for Sithole, present-day liberation movements are a continuum of anti-apartheid resistance.



Figure 16: Protestors gather around a burning tyre, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ *Toyi-toyi* is a South African dance that was historically used for intimidating the South African police and security forces during anti-apartheid demonstrations.



Figure 17: Protestors uphold a demonstration board with the words: “Black Lives are Cheap in Africa, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

In the next frame, armed policemen charge at the protestors who quickly disperse, whilst a huge banner fills the screen with the words “Black Lives are Cheap in Africa”. This imagery appears too reminiscent as it could easily be placed in conversation with the American “Black Lives Matter” movement. Whilst this chapter is primarily focused on South Africa, it is important to note that the history being contested reverberates across the African diaspora. South Africa is indeed an important diasporic interlocutor in dialogues pertaining to Black liberation across the globe. As I have demonstrated in various parts of this dissertation project, it is important to think of the Black

women filmmakers and their visual archives in diasporic terms as a form of enacting a network of solidarity and cross-cultural connectedness.

The aforementioned is supported by Paul Gilroy's observation attesting that South Africa's democratic transition "has the potential to generate 'an alternative sense of what our networked world might be and become, a new cosmopolitanism centered on the global south'"¹⁷⁸. In this instance, Gilroy argues that South Africa be considered as emblematic for humanitarian and cosmopolitan governance. Thus, when we closely examine the preoccupations underscored in Sithole's film, we can begin to see visual motifs that can be applied to various parts of the African diaspora as Black women's political and creative contributions are continuously threatened by erasure across the globe.

Yet, for scholars working within visual histories that contend with the American civil rights movement, it proves useful to equally engage with South Africa's specific racial history. It becomes apparent that indeed "apartheid stands as a cipher for the damage done to democracy by the fatal conjunction of race and politics. Its conceptual traces are interpretatively to the racialized organization of dwelling space in the US [and] anywhere that segregation has been elevated to the level of political principle. It provides a reminder that the political ontology of race is fatal to all democratic aspirations"¹⁷⁹. Whilst Gilroy's assertions prove to be salient, it is important to also state that his call for cosmopolitanism at times seems to overstate a form of "color-blind" and neoliberal logic that would prove to be extremely dangerous in the case of South Africa. For example, to cite the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC)¹⁸⁰ as an effective demonstration

¹⁷⁸ Paul Gilroy, "A New Cosmopolitanism" in *Interventions (London, England)* 7 (3): 287–92, (2005): 287.

¹⁷⁹ Paul Gilroy, "A New Cosmopolitanism" in *Interventions (London, England)* 7 (3): 287–92, (2005): 291.

¹⁸⁰ Instituted by Nelson Mandela and chaired by Desmond Tutu, the TRC was a massive exploration into South Africa's human rights abuses between 1960 and 1994. Many scholars have appropriately critiqued the commission as

of multiracial attempts to heal the viscous history of apartheid proves to be simplistic at its best. Any radical scholar of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness¹⁸¹ politics would agree that the project of a diversified "rainbow nation" leans towards neoliberal fashionings of racialized histories. Apartheid legislation classified all South Africans into one of four racial groups: Black, white, colored, and Indian. According to Biko, Blacks are defined "as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against"¹⁸². Due to the distinctive nature of the oppression experienced by Black people, Biko was critical of any liberation movement that was led by white liberals even if it was under the guise of solidarity. Therefore, the types of freedoms that were necessary for the liberation of Black people were rather different to those sought after by Indian and Colored people.

a neoliberal project that sacrificed justice for reconciliation and ultimately failed to condemn the apartheid law and its leaders. For more context see Rina Kashyap (2009), Nontsasa Nako (2016), Josh Bowsher (2020) etc.

¹⁸¹ As a Black feminist scholar particularly concerned with subverting the heteropatriarchal canon, Sithole's film serves as instrumental since she is able to demonstrate how Black women activists such as Mamphela Ramphele are often rendered invisible in the history of the Black Consciousness movement. Thus, it is inaccurate to solely attribute the politics and impact of the movement to Biko alone, as Ramphele proves to also be at the forefront of establishing the political concerns of Black Consciousness.

¹⁸² Steve Biko and Arnold Millard, *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, Ed.* 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), 48.



Figure 18: Leaders of the 1956 Women's March hold petitions outside the South African Union buildings, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

Sithole at times seems to slip into the trap of overstating the neoliberal rainbow nation politics by highlighting the multiracial figures who led the 1956 March. She includes a mainstream media favorite, which is a photograph that has been made to be emblematic of the Women's March. In this black and white photograph, we see the multiracial leaders of the march: Rahima Moosa (Indian), Lilian Ngoyi (Black), Helen Joseph (white) and Sophia Williams (Colored) as they carry stacks of petitions to present to the government at the Union Buildings. To add to the sentimental nature of this image, she includes a visual account of Nelson Mandela who spoke at Helen Joseph's funeral. In his speech Mandela remarks that: "Helen Joseph is a woman we can truly regard as a figure which has helped to shape our destiny and who is an indelible part of our history"¹⁸³. This

¹⁸³ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa)

speech is immediately juxtaposed with archival footage from Helen Joseph's funeral where we see scores of people, consisting of majority Black and a few white people.



Figure 19: Crowds of standing people, in attendance of Helen Joseph's funeral, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

Thus, what is being visually communicated is that indeed, Helen Joseph was a “political hero” to many Black people—who associated their newfound freedom in democratic South Africa to the contributions and allyship performed by Joseph. Whilst we cannot discount Joseph's contributions to the success of the women's movement, Steve Biko's teachings have warned against the so-called “white savior” complex that is often hailed by neoliberal accounts of anti-racism. This is a white-washing of history that tends to minimize radical Black resistance by overstating neoliberal narratives of the “white savior”. Furthermore, the choice to include the voice of Mandela as a

visual supplement to Joseph's funeral seems to be coded on several accounts especially if we are to consider how Mandela's leadership as the first democratic president of the country came with the promise of a racism free and "rainbow nation" South Africa.

So resonant was this neoliberal political ideology that it led to Mandela becoming the 1993 "Nobel Peace Prize" winner for what was deemed as his "momentous contribution to *peaceful* elimination of apartheid in South Africa". Needless to say, there was nothing peaceful about the transition from apartheid to the new democratic dispensation thus, it is ironic that Mandela came to be celebrated by the West, as a global figure of "peace" and "reconciliation". His promise of a race-free society was never quite fulfilled as present-day South Africa continues to be racially divided, with the economic resources of the country remaining in the hands of white capital and the few elite Black bourgeoisie. This failure is echoed by 2015 "Fallist" movements.

Whilst Sithole's film illustrates the multiracial leadership of the Women's March, it is also very clear that the film's emphasis points us in the direction of the disproportionate archival erasure that is faced by the Black women of the liberation movement. Sithole's cinematic gaze is careful to depict how the Women's March directly correlates to the 2015 student-led "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Fees Must Fall"¹⁸⁴ movements and the central role that was played by younger Black feminist activists. Black feminist activist, Simamkele Dlakavu is a key voice in the film *Standing on their Shoulders*. It is crucial to note that as one of the student activists who was a part of the "Fallist" protests, Dlakavu is in fact a part of the history that she provides commentary on. Thus, her voice in the film serves as a testimonial and by pulling from these personal histories and testimonials as

¹⁸⁴ What initially began as the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement at the University of Cape Town campus, sparked a national movement across several university campuses across South Africa. This national movement was referred to as the "Fees Must Fall" Movement. Due to the intersectional nature of the movement fundamentally calling every system of oppression to "fall", the overarching banner for all these movements were also referred to as the "fallist" movements.

a filmic device, Sithole is able to challenge the idea that those who are at the forefront of resistance movements cannot write about their own struggles and experiences because they are not neutral.

As though to challenge the very notion that dismisses the personal as lacking intellectual rigor, Dlakavu is further able to theorize on her activism. To this end, her scholarship reveals that the “Fallist” movements “started as agitations for social justice on South African university campuses and aided by cyber activism [sprung into the] national political arena and changed not only the cultures and climates on university campuses, but also revolutionized the nature of protest in [South Africa]”¹⁸⁵. What is noteworthy for the purposes of this study is that the “Fallist” protests were a result of what started as a call to decolonize university campuses—which still upheld the violent histories of colonialism and apartheid through the visual commemoration of colonial statues. This signals to us that what culminated in national protests at universities across the country, was sparked by an understanding of the ideological role that is played by visual monuments and how these visual monuments reinforce the ways in which history is constructed and reified in the public’s visual imagination. Providing context for what instigated the wave of these national student-led protests, Ndelu, Dlakavu and Boswell explicate that:

“The latest wave of activism started in March 2015, when a group of predominantly Black students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) successfully used the protest method of civil disobedience to demand the removal of a prominently placed statue of the coloniser Cecil John Rhodes from campus. For these students the statue was a symbol of the continued racism and alienation they experienced as a result of an incomplete transformation project 21 years into South Africa’s transition to

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Boswell, Sandy Ndeli and Simamkele Dlakavu, “Womxn’s and Nonbinary Activists’ Contribution to the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall Student Movements: 2015 and 2016” in *Agenda (Durban)* 31 (3–4), 2015: 1.

democracy. RMF's Mission Statement described the movement as "an independent collective of students, workers and staff who have come together to end institutionalized racism and patriarchy at UCT". The movement used the demand to remove the statue as an entry-point into a broader set of decolonization demands, including the removal of offensive artworks that celebrated colonization from campus, in-sourcing outsourced university workers, transforming a predominantly white professoriate, and decolonizing the university curriculum to center Africa and African knowledge systems across the disciplines"¹⁸⁶.

Sithole's Black feminist gaze seeks to do away with linear forms of temporality. Through the function of testimonials from Black feminist activists of both the 1956 Women's March and the "Fallist" movements, the camera performs a ritual of memory-work by producing fragmented shots, moving back and forth between the past and the present. This narrative style is symbolic in that it shows the apartheid past as not yet past. In the same way that the women of 1956 had to resist and oppose oppressive regimes, the young Black feminists of the "Fallist" movements in 2015 continue to protest. Thus, by representing these memories of political struggle and violence, the film is able to demonstrate how the South African past remains unsettled, contentious, and very much with us still.

¹⁸⁶ Barbara Boswell, Sandy Ndeli and Simamkele Dlakavu, "Womxn's and Nonbinary Activists' Contribution to the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall Student Movements: 2015 and 2016" in *Agenda (Durban)* 31 (3-4), 2015: 1.



Figure 20: Black women protestors march against “Pass Laws”, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

In the above frame, Sithole transports us back into history by interweaving black and white archival images from the 1956 women’s march. This is accompanied by commentary from younger Black feminists and activists who proclaim; “The resistance of women can never only be attributed to 1956. We know that women had been organizing. Women had been mobilizing and women have been resisting in many ways”¹⁸⁷. Such a proclamation highlights the film’s fundamental aim of providing the viewer with a Black feminist counter-history of the South African anti-apartheid movement. This is a counter-history working against the homogeneity of national identity politics

¹⁸⁷ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

which often rely on excluding those who unsettle the coherence of the post-apartheid national imaginary¹⁸⁸.

Such a voice that has consistently faced the threat of erasure and silencing is that of Winnie Mandela. As though to offer us a redemptive song on the legacy of Winnie Mandela as a symbol of Black feminist refusal, Sithole's film reimagines Winnie beyond the patriarchal confines of hegemonic historical accounts. Therefore, this Black feminist approach to visual history demonstrates that inscribing women into history does not only include narrowing the gaps of normative histories and giving them a voice, but it also involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of their historical significance. The film positions Winnie as a form of "troubling vision"¹⁸⁹. She is a troubling presence in that she refuses to be erased easily out of history.

As the camera collapses time and transports us back to the contemporary moment, music performs *ingoma* and a form of memory work. Representing memories of violence is often very complicated consequently memory demands for us to engage with more than one period and time (durational instead of chronological), it forces an engagement between the past and the present to exist simultaneously. The music enters the frame, and we are confronted with the lyrics "Senzeni na, Senzeni na?"—a repetitious cry which translates to "what have we done"? as though to probe for a rationale that would justify the violent conditions that frame this painful history. The voices of the choir continue and in unison proclaim "amabhunu ayazitha"/"the Afrikaners are the enemy".

¹⁸⁸ See Haseenah Ebrahim and Jodarcy Ellapen, "Close-Up: South African Cinema: Cinema in Post-apartheid South Africa: New Perspectives." *Black Camera: The Newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives* 9 (2), 2018: 169–76, 170.

¹⁸⁹ See Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

The music playing in the background attests to a painful past—the sociopolitical evils of Dutch settler colonialism.

The direct reference to the Afrikaner race forces us to grapple with a specific time in history where 1948 serves as a turning point in South Africa as this is the year when apartheid was instituted and implemented under the leadership of the “National Party” which was an Afrikaner ethnic nationalist party. Thus, the musical references made by the film function as memory work that informs the canon of Black diasporic experiences. It is crucial to understand this recovery project made by Sithole as an attempt to write back to dominant forms of white apartheid history in that the music functions as an archive of drafting in the existences of those silenced by oppression. Whilst the music hums in the background, the camera cuts to Winnie Mandela as she shares her pride for the new generation of Black feminists and agitators of oppressive power. This proves to be a significant moment—the passing on of the baton as it were, from one generation to the next. With extreme tenderness, she muses and affirms:

“I’m so proud of the Wits SRC president. To have young women like this on an occasion of this nature. You have no idea what it means to our generation. That day sixty years ago when they collected women from all over the country. Women who were walking barefoot. Women who came from the countryside with their babies on their backs and it was those years when apartheid was at its worst. We will sleep peacefully when we leave this world because we know we have left the custodians of the struggle for women in your hands”¹⁹⁰.

¹⁹⁰ Winnie Mandela in *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

Through this form of recollecting the events of the past and particularly, the day of the women's March, Sithole positions Winnie as a griot and a cultural bearer of historical knowledge. For the new generation of Black feminist agitators, Winnie becomes an ancestor. Thus, by framing Winnie alongside the "Fees Must Fall" youth leader, Nompendulo—Sithole again stresses the importance of intergenerational solidarity.



Figure 21: “Fees Must Fall” leader and student activist, Nompheulo Mkhathshwa listens to Winnie Mandela speak, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.



Figure 22: Winnie Mandela embraces “Fees Must Fall” youth leader: Nompheulo Mkhathshwa, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

In a different shot, the camera pans to the leader of the “Fallist” movement Nompandolo Mkhatswa as she raises her fist in the air proclaiming; “*Amandla*”—and the comrades respond with “*awethu*”—the power is ours! That is an audacious statement to make when systemic oppression persists in its attempt to render one powerless. As a form of a diasporic call and response, it is also important to note that the iconic reference of the raised fist reverberates across the diaspora as a symbol of fighting oppression.



Figure 23: Student leader, Nompandolo Mkhatswa raises both fists in the air as she leads scores of student protestors at the “Fees Must Fall” march, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

Thus, Sithole's cinematic gaze draws an intergenerational parallel between Nompandolo and Winnie as women who are at the forefront ushering in change to the South African political landscape despite the dismissal of men. As a testament of the continuum between the 1956 Women's March and the 2015 "Fees Must Fall" movement, Sithole focuses the camera on feminist politics scholar Shireen Hassim who offers us a meditation that captures the fundamental themes of this film and the words of the title— "We get this gift, these resources from the people on whose shoulders we stand. But we have to reenergize and extend it so that we too gift to the future"¹⁹¹. In a separate scene, Hassim offers a dynamic analysis of the 1965 Women's March against the pass laws. She explains that:

"To some extent, the men in the ANC, in particular, weren't sure that the march was a good idea. They were worried about what would happen if women got arrested. And the women said, 'Well, we're not carrying passes and we're prepared to go to jail.' And the men said, 'Well, if you go to jail, who will look after the children?' So, the very idea that women could leave their children was considered to be radical"¹⁹².

The above observation is noteworthy for several reasons, the first being that of course historically women have been limited to the domestic sphere. That of being mothers, wives and homemakers: essentially auxiliary to the heteropatriarchal center. Thus, it is indeed radical to observe that whilst men had never successfully protested against pass laws, it was the women who came out in droves to challenge the racial order and ultimately topple a significant aspect of the apartheid legal system

¹⁹¹ Shireen Hassim in *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa)

¹⁹² Ibid.

of the time. Furthermore, heteropatriarchal accounts of the anti-apartheid movement have often positioned Nelson Mandela as the face of the liberation movement. In fact, Mandela similarly to Martin Luther King has been appropriated as a neoliberal representation of peace and humanitarian democracy—conveniently framing both leaders within a framework of respectability politics due to the assumption of them endorsing a less radical Black politic.

Perhaps one of the most pertinent reflections in the film is the way that heteropatriarchal accounts of Black liberation movements often dismiss women radicals such as Winnie Mandela as “the wife of Nelson Mandela”. African feminist and scholar Pumla Gqola is another profound voice in the film, and she speaks directly to this erasure of women’s contributions by asserting that what makes Winnie Mandela an interesting case study is that in as much as she often faced the same violence and threat of invisibility and erasure, she refused to be silenced. As the film recounts through the voice of Pumla Gqola, after the women’s march Winnie emerges as a highly visible leader of the women’s movement. Among other women members she organized and mobilized more people to join the resistance movement. She continued to have a huge following of grassroots supporters because she continued to serve the community that she was a part of. Unlike many liberation leaders who soon became assimilated into the Black bourgeoisie in the post-apartheid era, Winnie continued to live in the township of Soweto and never relocated to the suburban gated communities. This is crucial to note, especially if we are to consider that Nelson Mandela himself did not complete his prison term in the cells of Robin Island, instead he was later transferred to house arrest in a prison farm which was at the time described as a “suitable, comfortable and properly secured home”¹⁹³.

¹⁹³ Christopher S. Wren, Special to the New York Times. “Mandela Moved to House at Prison Farm” in *The New York Times*, Late Edition (East Coast) edition, 1988.



Figure 24: Winnie Mandela accompanied by fellow comrades at an anti-apartheid rally, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

As though to reiterate Winnie’s grassroots approach to leadership, Sithole shows several archival images of Winnie leading “from the ground” in her ANC¹⁹⁴ regalia. It is interesting to note that we never really see many images of Mandela in ANC uniform. Instead, he is constantly seen in formal suits and a tie. This visual coding seems to reiterate his position as a member of the Black elite. For Winnie to be visualized in uniform, Sithole seems to subtly reinforce Winnie’s position as a servant of the people. A testament of Winnie’s commitment to the collective of the liberation

¹⁹⁴ The African National Congress (ANC) is a political party in South Africa. It originated as a liberation movement known for its opposition to apartheid and has governed the country since 1994, when the first post-apartheid election resulted in Nelson Mandela being elected as President of South Africa.

movement is further demonstrated in that at the time of her then husband's house arrest, she refused to take advantage of the open visiting hours for Mandela until all other political prisoners were allowed the same leniency. This commitment to the collective would persist until her final years.



Figure 25: Winnie Mandela guides and leads younger comrades, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.



Figure 26: Winnie Mandela and Nelson Mandela raise their fists at crowds of people celebrating Nelson's release from prison, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

The camera retroactively pans back to 1990, the year of Nelson Mandela's release from prison. Winnie is by his side. Arm in arm, they both raise their fists to the crowds of people and supporters of the liberation movement. It is at that moment that Winnie's role as a prominent political figure and radical activist in her own right becomes minimized so that she is publicly reduced to being a mere wife to the hero who is Nelson Mandela. Speaking on this historical erasure and the attempts to delegitimize women radicals such as Winnie, Gqola points out the gender-bias and states; "Women are always in danger of being rendered into train wrecks. But every time two radicals come together, we take the man and make him the hero and we make the woman just the wife"¹⁹⁵.

¹⁹⁵ Pumla Gqola in *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

Through additional testimonials from antiapartheid activist: Thenjiwe Mntintso, it is made clear in the film that Winnie suffered unfair consequences in comparison to her male counterparts in the struggle. Whilst other members of the liberation movement had been banished and exiled back to their homelands and away from the political city center of Johannesburg, Winnie instead was banished to a small town with an Afrikaner stronghold; Brandfort—and was forced into years of solitary confinement where she knew neither the people nor the environment she was in. Once the moment arrived for the country to transition into a new democracy the women of the liberation movement are ostracized and what results is an overdetermined invisibilization of decades worth of women’s activism. Sithole superimposes the visual rendering of Winnie to speak back to this silence.



Figure 27: Winnie Mandela at Nelson Mandela's inauguration, *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole, 2018.

To further highlight the public and political ostracization of Winnie, the camera transports us to the day of Nelson's inauguration as the first president of the new democratic South Africa. Winnie enters the frame in conspicuous flamboyance, donning an oversized hat, green and black regalia, as though to signal the colors of the ANC and gold jewelry. The flamboyance of her outfit is significant because it renders her hyper-visible in a moment when the efforts to silence and erase her from the public memory are at their highest. Sithole utilizes archival footage that has never been seen in mainstream renderings of the 1994 presidential inauguration. As the viewer witnesses

Winnie's entrance, the voice-over of the reporter chimes in and notes: "It's taken a long time. Decades of suffering and sacrifice as Mr. Mandela arrived accompanied by his eldest daughter. His estranged wife, Winnie was searching for her seat in the crowd"¹⁹⁶.

It is significant to note that on the day where the country celebrates the transition into democracy, Winnie was never reserved a seat at the day's proceedings. After years of being at the forefront of organizing and leading various resistance movements, the political project of female erasure becomes imminent. In that moment, Winnie is forgotten. Her political contributions discarded, and she is left excluded from the proceedings of a momentous day that would have never occurred without her direct political activism. However, unlike other women activists who have been successfully erased from the public's visual memory, Winnie signifies a specific type of defiance against the project of invisibility. As noted by Pumla Gqola's voice in the film, Winnie continued to perform a certain type of public militancy that constantly contested her erasure.

¹⁹⁶ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

The Rise of *Fallism*: The Black Body as an Archive and Site of *Remembrance*



Figure 28: Topless student protestors stage a naked protest at “The Fees Must Fall” march, *Wits Vuvuzela*, April 27, 2016, <https://witsvuvuzela.com/2016/04/27/iamoneinthree-protest-in-pictures-and-video/>

In this part of my discussion, I would like to transition us to the year 2015 as a contemporary moment that marks the rise of “Fallism”. Sithole is able to frame this moment as the visual expression of a new generation of Black feminists. Whilst the 1956 Women’s March is evidenced as having adopted a more peaceful stance towards their resistance, the younger generation enacts more radical strategies. Working against the lingering consequences of archival power, whereby institutional archives are conferred authority and legitimacy, I propose that we meditate on the

subversive potentiality of positioning the Black body as an archive and a site of remembrance. Given the violence that is reproduced when we center orthodox archives, decolonial praxis demands more inventive possibilities of “redress and the imperative of critical archival practice”¹⁹⁷. Thus, Sithole’s cinematic practice seems to enact multiple creative strategies that make Black visual annotation generative irrespective of persistent archival erasure.

Through historical consideration, “the Black body, as one of these *other* bodies, has been defined in relation to the Western body, and consequently is negatively scripted. African bodies and representations of sexuality are portrayed as ‘grotesque, uncivilized and crudely sexual’¹⁹⁸. Such a history is directly tied to that of Sarah Baartman—an enslaved South-African woman who has been archivally marked and documented as “a body in pain, a body shamed, and a body violated”¹⁹⁹. Thus, through such historical scripts, it is appropriate that we consider how Black women’s bodies hold potentiality in disrupting normative ways of thinking about sexuality²⁰⁰.

Sithole’s camera scans various visual instantiations of young women “fallists” leading the movement through their voices and embodied performance. In their attempt to obtain ceasefire, a group of young women bravely stand bare chested and act as a buffer zone between the armed police and the rest of the protesting students. Sithole’s gaze is deliberately tender in this instance. In the form of a long shot, the camera pans over the ground first, directing our gaze towards the

¹⁹⁷ Marisa Fuentes, “‘Attending To Black Death:’ Black Women’s Bodies in the Archive and the Afterlife of Captivity” in *Diacritics* 48 (3), 2020: 119

¹⁹⁸ Nadine Lake, “Black Lesbian Bodies - Reflections on a Queer South African Archive” in *Africa Insight* 44 (1): 69–83, 2014: 70.

¹⁹⁹ Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu, “Body of Evidence: Saartjie Baartman and the Archive” in *Representation and Black Womanhood*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 18.

²⁰⁰ Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu, “Body of Evidence: Saartjie Baartman and the Archive” in *Representation and Black Womanhood*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 18.

marching feet of the women protesters before it zooms out and reveals the young women with their naked torsos. There is nothing salacious nor sexualizing about this gaze and this is critical to note as a comparison against a history of visibility that has often rendered Black women's bodies as sexually deviant²⁰¹. Thus, to the trained eye it is immediately clear that Sithole is indeed enacting a Black feminist gaze and a rigorous care ethic. This is an ethics of disrupting power in hegemonic visual vocabularies.

Due to the heteropatriarchal nature of resistance against apartheid, contemporary Black feminists of the "Fees Must Fall Movement" were determined to demonstrate and exhibit a more radical feminist politic as an approach to their activism. Thus, to subvert the ways in which patriarchal violence uses nakedness as a shaming device, the fallist feminists took to their bodies as radical sites of enacting resistance. Fallist activist Simamkele Dlakavu is a key voice in Sithole's film, and her insights prove to be highly instructive as a scholar, witness and a participant in the fallist protests. She notes that naked protests belong to a long lineage where Black people have used their bodies to resist and claim space. Due to the violent nature of visual histories pertaining to Black women's bodies, I perceive the body as a site that raises questions of power. If we are to consider how the violence of apartheid and colonialism has produced an irretrievable loss and erasure of much of our histories, then it becomes necessary to have to imagine alternative forms of what constitutes the archive of Black life. Thus, a Black feminist archival practice may signal the body as a tactile form of archiving resistance.

Black feminist scholars such as Pumla Gqola, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe describe the histories of Blackness as a presence that ruptures the present. In *What is Slavery to*

²⁰¹ See Janell Hobson, "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film" in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30 (1/2): 45-59. 2002

Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa, Pumla Gqola sets out to delineate South Africa's transition from histories of colonialism, slavery and apartheid. She argues that in relation to these historical transitions, "memory" features prominently in the country's reckoning with its pasts. In this sense, memory is active, entailing a personal relationship with the past which acts as mediator of reality in the everyday. To this end she asserts that: "history shows us how the past is finished while memory instead reveals how the past at times collides with the present, therefore the past is not a complete process"²⁰². If we are to apply this rationale to Sithole's film, it becomes clear that multiple histories are brought to bear by highlighting how Black women turned towards their bodies to stage resistance. Working against histories that only remember Black women's bodies as violated dead "flesh", Sithole instead visualizes the vibrancy and militancy of Black embodiment. This visual enactment is a radical exercise staging a counter-historiography.

Following suite to Gqola's theorizations, Sharpe contends that living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence. Again here, we are being reminded of how quotidian forms of Black life are constantly marred by intimate forms historical violence. Given that the past is not past—yet it reappears, always, to ruptures the present²⁰³. Sharpe poses the question: What does it mean to suggest that those Africans who died in the Middle Passage might still be very alive, for they too are a part of the wake, known as residence time? Sithole invokes this notion of residence time by conflating the "Fees Must Fall Movement" with the 1956 Women's March. She further illustrates how events of the 2015 "Fees Must Fall" protests collide with the history of the 1976 Soweto

²⁰² Pumla Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 10.

²⁰³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

Uprising. Through a series of demonstrations and protests, the youth of 1976 challenged the apartheid government by refusing to accept Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. An estimated twenty-thousand Black students took part in the protests, purporting that Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor. This part of history has been memorialized in the national archive and public imagination through a famous photograph of Hector Pieterse, who was a twelve-year old schoolboy who was shot and killed when police opened fire on Black student protestors.



Figure 29: Student protestors carry the lifeless body of Hector Pieterse on the day of the 1976 student rebellion in Soweto, *South African History Online*, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/hector-pieterse>

I must confess, that even as I present this image as visual evidence, I am confronted by the ethical bind of reproducing the violence that is captured in the image. Whilst the image is from the year 1976, images of dead Black bodies remain all too familiar and continuously reinstated in the global

visual archive. However, Sithole is careful to not reproduce this visual grammar of Black death as she never shows any imagery of dead or bleeding bodies. It is for these reasons that the staging of the naked protests serves to form a radical rupture to the colonial and apartheid visual archive. As a deliberate attempt to counter and subvert visual renderings of the 1976 student uprisings, Sithole demonstrates the fire and vigor that is radically enacted by the young Black feminist activists of the 2015 “Fees Must Fall” movements.

In order to reconcile the epistemic and material violence that is produced by hegemonic history and institutional archives, Saidiya Hartman proposes *critical fabulation*²⁰⁴ as a framework of imagining the otherwise. To disarm the allure of repeating and reproducing narratives of violence Hartman turns towards storytelling and speculative narration as counter-archival strategies. Given the aforementioned articulations of history, Black feminists reveal to us that in order to counter the violence of dominant history and to resist archival absences, we ought to imagine the archive through an aesthetics of the otherwise. I shall develop this concept further in my chapter on Zanele Muholi’s self-portrait photography. Thus, it would be appropriate to consider the body as an archive and as a site in which narratives are also at stake. Moreover, if we are to apply this logic to how the Black feminists of the fallist movements used their bodies as sites of resistance, we can begin to imagine how the physical and psychological scars endured in moments of protest are stored and archived in the body.

²⁰⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the extent to which women's participation in the struggle for freedom is represented and remembered, and in many cases forgotten, in contemporary South African visual culture. Through an intimate reading and analysis of the film: *Standing on their Shoulders*, I have been able to prove that the film provides a useful case study for thinking about cinematic and visual memory practices, how they order gender, and the messages they convey about the perceived importance of Black women's political roles during apartheid and South Africa's political transition into a democracy. Ultimately, this chapter has been able to prove that Sithole's film constitutes a decolonial visual archive due to the ways in which hegemonic apartheid histories of Black resistance are challenged and subsequently refused. By privileging the cinematic gaze of a Black woman filmmaker, this chapter echoes the prevailing thematic concerns of the entire dissertation project which are ultimately preoccupied with the articulation of a decolonial Black feminist aesthetic.

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CHAPTER THREE

Visualizing the *Otherwise*—Somnyama Ngonyama and Queer Counter-Histories

The early images I remember are black-and-white images of apartheid-era South Africa. Most were captured by male photographers like Ernest Cole or Alf Kumalo. Early images I saw depicted Black women crying, images of pain, of struggle. Before Black lesbian imagery clouded my mind, the first images I remember are of domestic workers, which were captured mainly by men²⁰⁵.

I am producing this photographic document...to teach people about our history, to re-think what history is all about, to re-claim it for ourselves, to encourage people to use artistic tools such as cameras as weapons to fight back, forcing the viewer to question their desire to gaze at images of my Black figure²⁰⁶.

Cameras gave to Black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence, it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of Black life to the visual, to artmaking, make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional Black aesthetic...All colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination recognize that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle. The history of Black liberation movements...could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access.—bell hooks²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁵ Deborah Willis and Zanele Muholi, *Zanele Muholi Faces & Phases: Conversation with Deborah Willis*. Aperture (San Francisco, Calif. Aperture Foundation, Inc, 2015).

²⁰⁶ Zanele Muholi in Mussai, Renée. “Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama” in *Hail the Dark Lioness: Renée Mussai in Conversation with Zanele Muholi*, with Additional Contributions by Unoma Azuah, Milisuthando Bongela, Ama Josephine Budge, [and 21 Others]. First edition. New York, N.Y: Aperture, 2018.

²⁰⁷ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: New Press, 1995), 57.

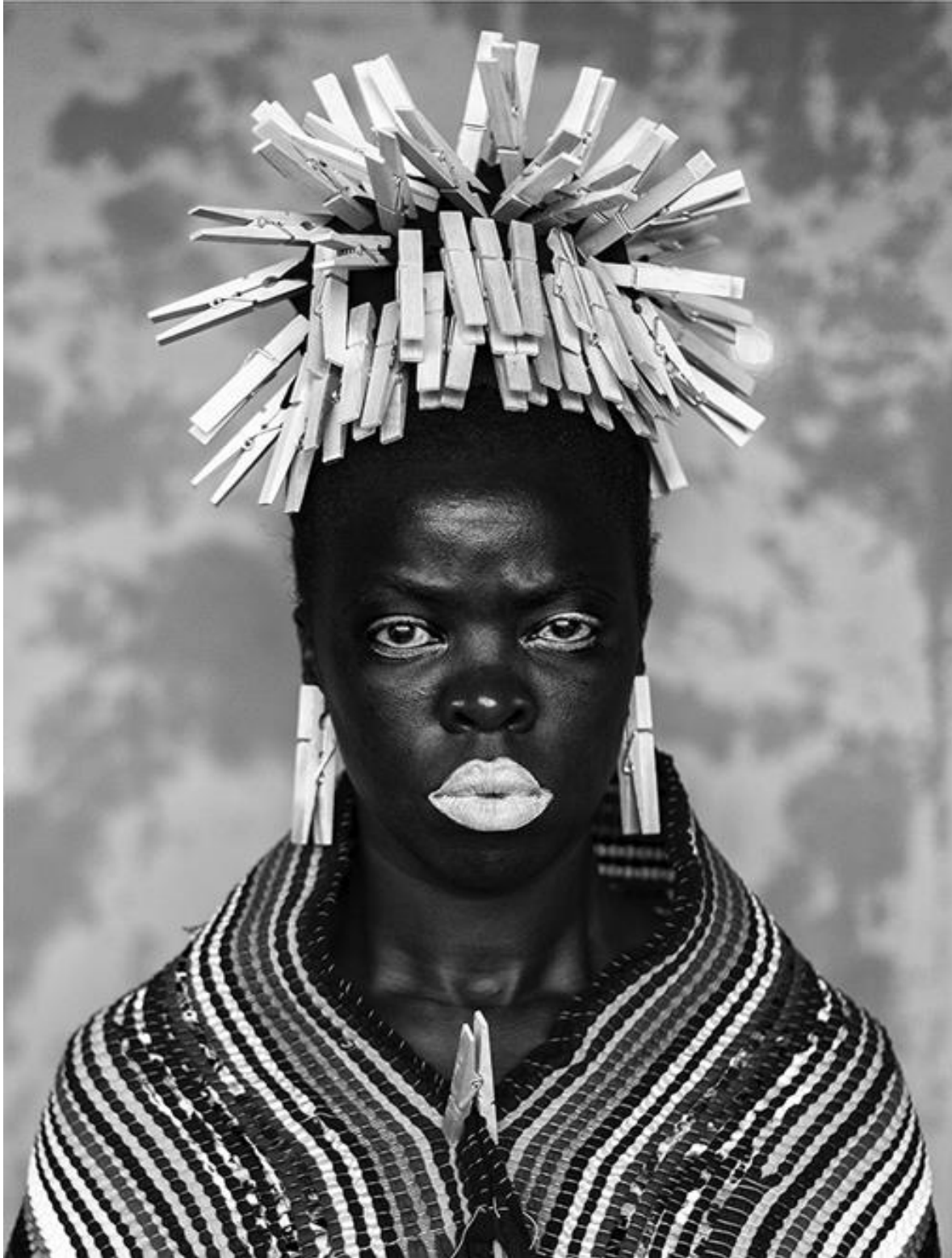


Figure 30: *Bester I, Mayotte, 2015*, photographed by Zanele Muholi, Stevenson Gallery,

http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/bester1_mayotte_2015.html

Introduction: *Bester I*²⁰⁸ and The Antidote of Beauty

Zanele Muholi steps into the frame “Blackened”²⁰⁹ and crowned in wooden laundry pegs paired with a rag-rug shawl “pegged” around their²¹⁰ shoulders. A peg dangles on each respective ear, mimicking high-fashion/couture²¹¹ earrings—this is a thing of beauty. To signal an investment in beauty and fashion is both audacious and radical because it is to claim a stake in categories that have historically excluded Black women. It is to stage a rebellion against the history of photography that has insistently framed Blackness as undesirable and absent from the schema of revered aesthetics. Whilst this section of my discussion foregrounds a visual analysis of *Bester I* and Muholi’s subversive strategy of “beauty” as an antidote to histories of Black women’s labor and servitude, the overarching premise of this chapter seeks to position Muholi’s self-portraiture series, *Somnyama Ngonyama*, as a form of counter-histogramy, queer visual archive and the visual enactment of the *otherwise*. Underpinning the logics of queerness and Black feminist futurity is the idea that the present is never enough. It is in dreaming of the future and building the

²⁰⁸ This is the title of the image above which was captured in 2015 at the French overseas territory of Mayotte. Whilst I do not discuss the overlapping histories of French colonialism, I think it is important to note how Muholi’s practice of being somewhat of an embodied mobile studio means that the photographs she captures during her travels collide and rupture a multitude of colonial histories.

²⁰⁹ Muholi describes that their mission as a photographer and activist is “to queer, to Blacken, to open and to occupy space” (*Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness*: New York, 2018).

²¹⁰ Muholi prefers gender neutral pronouns: they/them/theirs. It is also crucial to note that there are no gender pronouns in the Zulu language, which is Muholi’s first language. I make mention of this to coincide with Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997) who asserts that the western ‘biologic’ gender hierarchy is a colonial invention and function that is not as universal as is widely believed. By contrast, many precolonial African societies were gender neutral and as such gender was never an organizing principle. In fact, if we are to consider the particularity of Muholi’s Zulu culture—it is important to note that women maintain their maiden names even if they are to get married. Thus, one’s maternal lineage is held with far more regard.

²¹¹ Whilst this chapter does not focus on the realm of fashion, I signal towards it as Muholi has been deliberate in conceptualizing some of their self-portraits to echo the aesthetics of fashion photography (D’alieso, 2018). <https://www.1854.photography/2018/04/show-zanele-muholis-somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the-dark-lioness/>

possibilities of an *elsewhere* and *otherwise* that queer futurity and freedom are envisioned²¹². Thus, in this chapter I will conflate the terms elsewhere and otherwise to signal and gesture towards Muholi’s practice of visual dissent. Ultimately, I utilize the self-portraiture of Muholi to lean into Black feminism and Queer theory as arenas that open frameworks, methodologies, and epistemologies for a decolonized field of vision—that necessitates the production of a counter-history and an archive for narratives that are *otherwise* or *elsewhere* from colonialization.

Muholi’s visual grammar is laden with subversive strategies that gesture our gaze to reimagine hegemonic and historical visual scripts otherwise. In *Bester I*, the white paint covering Muholi’s pouted lips and white eyeliner stand out in contrast, to highlight their darkened skin and their piercing eyes. This is a clear strategy to direct our gaze to features that have been exploited by a racist visual market. To this end Muholi exclaims: “Too often I find we are being insulted, mimicked, and distorted by the privileged “other”²¹³. The exaggerated black and white tonal values of the monochrome image are a recurring visual motif in this self-portraiture series entitled: *Somnyama Ngonyama: Hail the Dark Lioness*. The contrast of Muholi’s skin is enhanced in post-production, which is significant to note as a distinctive practice from what critics have described as “strikingly evocative of blackface minstrelsy”²¹⁴. With the historical consideration that has rendered Blackness and dark skin as existing outside of western notions and standards of

²¹² See Jose Munoz (1999), Tina Campt (2017) and Saidiya Hartman (2019).

²¹³ See Berger, Maurice. “Zanele Muholi: Paying Homage to the History of Black Women.” *New York Times (Online)*, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/lens/zanele-muholi-somnyama-ngonyama-south-africa.html> and Mussai, Renée. “Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama” in *Hail the Dark Lioness: Renée Mussai in Conversation with Zanele Muholi*, with Additional Contributions by Unoma Azuah, Milisuthando Bongela, Ama Josephine Budge, [and 21 Others]. First edition. New York, N.Y: Aperture, 2018.

²¹⁴ See Nomusa Makhubu, Performing Blackface: Reflections on Zanele Muholi’s *Somnyama Ngonyama*. *Decolonial Propositions*. Issue 49. OnCurating.org, 2021: 110.

beauty, “in more than eighty (80) black and white self-portraits in *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Muholi transforms found objects and quotidian materials into dramatic and historically loaded props and subverts conventions of photography in western portraiture to foster critical questions about race, gender, sexuality and contested representations of the Black body”²¹⁵.

The crown of pegs on Muholi’s head exude a regality that contradicts the history of Black women’s labor and servitude that is clearly being evoked by each laundry peg. Photographic historian, Deborah Willis, refers to this visual strategy as “subversive resistance” — a metaphor for strategies that produce visual images to counter dominant meanings or stereotypes²¹⁶. To the discerning eye, it is immediately evident that the decision to be “clothed”²¹⁷ in a rug that strategically covers their shoulders is reminiscent of the indigenous Zulu practice whereby elder and married Zulu women cover their shoulders and heads as a form of asserting dignity and respectability²¹⁸—attributes which have historically been seldom correlated with Black women, let alone those who identify as queer. Muholi’s gaze is stern and unflinching. A slight frown is drawn in between their eyebrows as though to reprimand the spectator for even attempting to “look” at them.

²¹⁵ Muholi, Zanele, Sarah Allen, Yasufumi Nakamori, Candice Jansen, Pamela Dlungwana, Renée Mussai, et al. *Zanele Muholi*. Edited by Sarah Allen & Yasufumi Nakamori. London, England: Tate Publishing, 2020.

²¹⁶ See Deborah Willis, “The Sociologist’s Eye: W.E.B. DuBois and the Paris Exposition.” in *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. DuBois and African American Portraits of Progress* (Washington DC: Amistad Books and The Library of Congress, 2003), 52-60.

²¹⁷ I evoke this term to highlight how the imagery and theories advanced in this project work to counter a long history that has often rendered Black women as ideologically unclothed, unnamed and within the confinements of being under-theorized within the field of visual studies.

²¹⁸ I am by no means here alluding to a recovery project that is invested in respectability politics. However, it is important to contextualize Muholi’s visual grammar as being influenced by their Zulu culture and for us to consider the specificity of this culture in terms of how gender and femininity is constructed and performed.

The image above features *Bester*, a recurring character throughout the self-portraiture series. *Bester* is a commemoration of Muholi's mother, who passed away in 2009 after working as a domestic worker for forty-two (42) years. It is significant that Muholi center's their mother's personal history as this becomes a form of memory work and counter-historiography against hegemonic accounts of apartheid history that often dismiss domestic workers as muted minor figures. Providing further context Muholi reveals that:

“Somnyama Ngonyama began as a tribute to my mother, Bester Muholi (1936–2009), who was a maid. She was a beautiful Zulu woman who never made it onto the cover of a magazine. Her prison was someone's kitchen ... so these portraits ask us to bear in mind that Bester herself was locked into 42 years of servitude. They are a statement of reclamation, and the staging of beauty: to release her from a fixed position of servitude. I thought of domestic workers whose beauty had never been celebrated, whose life stories were never contextualized: who deserve to be recognized, like the great heroines of our times”²¹⁹.

It is interesting that Muholi denotes beauty as an antidote and a map towards an *elsewhere* to this painful history. Thus, to “beautify” the portraiture of Bester, Muholi signals to white lipstick and earrings made of pegs. I further interpret the “white” paint on their lips as annotating towards the notion of the “aesthetic” which is always a question of power. In *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract*, Clyde Taylor argues that [photography] and other forms of art have often reproduced and perpetuated whiteness as a legitimate marker of art and beauty. To challenge the politics of these systemic assumptions Taylor states: “the veracity and probity of ‘the aesthetic,’

²¹⁹ Zanele Muholi in Renée Mussai, “LETTER IV: WHERE ARE THEY? – M/OTHERING R/EVOLUTIONS” in *Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation*, (Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2022), 237.

the overdeveloped paradigm for control of our values regarding art and beauty, an eighteenth-century intellectual plantation from whose grip most of us have yet to free ourselves”²²⁰. He further argues that the idea of classical art in itself is a grand illusion therefore, when we think of an aesthetic which is both ‘classical’ and ‘pure’, we must contend with how art has been historicized through a system of ‘purification’ which is nothing more than a tool of ethnocentricity and racial ideology²²¹. Following this line of reasoning, I deem it appropriate that we interpret Muholi’s white lipstick as a form of commentary against the white-washed historical accounts of classical aesthetics and beauty. Thus, in challenging this western version of classical art, Muholi is able to launch a script that counters this hegemonic Art history.

It is subversive to instrumentalize a tool of oppression and servitude as somewhat of a fashion accessory and a site for beauty. It is also a form of *fashioning an otherwise*. Thus, to don a crown of pegs is to both claim the monstrosity of this history while simultaneously disarming its visual efficacy. Therefore, the portrait of Bester subverts in subtle and knowing ways, images of the colonial and apartheid representational archive. Muholi is clearly aware of the ever-present hegemonic gaze because for white South African’s who have been conditioned to specific stereotypical images of Black women, beauty and servitude exist as antithetical.

Gabeba Baderoon argues that “domestic labor in white homes has historically shaped the entry of Black women into public space in South Africa. In fact, so strong is the latter association that the Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles reveals that in South African English the word maid denotes both “Black woman” and “servant”²²². Given these histories of

²²⁰ Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract--Film and Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), xiii.

²²¹ Ibid, 263.

²²² Gabeba Baderoon, “The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa” in *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1 (2): 173–88, 2014: 173.

racial and gender hierarchy, the white domestic space has been one that has systemically rendered Black women as the infantilized “other”. In *Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers under Apartheid* Jacklyn Cock echoes this assertion by pointing out that: “white children and families were inducted into codes of race and gender through the labor relations of the household, in which Black women carried out the daily, intimate tasks of housecleaning, childcare, and cooking”²²³. Muholi is careful to trigger this racial imaginary and has done so in more overt ways in their 2008 installation and performance piece: *Massa & Mina(h)* where they explore the monstrous intimacy between “the maid” and “the madam”. In this piece they also broach on the sexual violence that Black women endured in the homes of their employees. I raise our awareness to the above installation performance to demonstrate the differences in how Muholi intervenes hegemonic history. I offer that in their subsequent *Bester* series, Muholi offers a more radical and decolonial account to histories of Black women’s servitude. As a distinction to *Massa & Mina(h)*, in *Bester* Muholi employs creative visual strategies that move us beyond the monstrous so as to envision an otherwise.

Indeed, *Bester I* can be interpreted as a radical departure from the creative strategies that are deployed in *Massa & Mina(h)* (2008) in that Muholi “exalts” the figure of the domestic worker and imagines her otherwise. Unlike the former installation, whereby they wear the actual “maid uniform” and explicitly evoke the imagery of Black domestics in relationship to their white “madams”, in *Bester’s* self-portrait Muholi subverts and creatively resists the apartheid racial and gender hierarchy by centering Bester as the focus of their visual universe. Furthermore, they “clothe” Bester with a shawl around her shoulders. I interpret this shawl as serving a double

²²³ Gabeba Baderoon, “The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa” in *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1 (2): 173–88, 2014: 178.

function. First, it is positioned as a form of a “hero’s cape” which coincides with Muholi asserting that that they wanted to contextualize domestic workers “as the heroines of our times”²²⁴. Second, it renders Bester as a regal Zulu woman. This is significant because if we contextualize Bester within her own cultural positioning then we move away from how colonial and apartheid histories have defined her. As a Zulu woman, she is a universe unto herself—a person of honor and value. She is in nobody’s kitchen. She is fully actualized with a sense of defiance that inspires her to stare back at the camera and ultimately, she “returns the gaze”. In the pages to follow, I shall provide more historical context for how *Somnyama Ngonyama* emerges as a manifestation of Muholi’s art-activism, and this will enable me to further underscore the subversive strategies of the otherwise that they utilize to offer a queer counter-history of Black women who have been obscured and absented in apartheid’s visual archive.

Contextualizing Muholi’s Art Activism & Methods for Framing a Queer Counter-Archive

Muholi has timelessly referred to their art as a form of activism that is meant to do the political work of evidencing the past and present while imagining a queerer future. It is important to note that this overt commitment to activism and their acute awareness of the necessity of destabilizing heteropatriarchal visual norms can be traced back to how they came into the practice of photographing. Muholi has shared that they began taking photographs informally at events and parties to challenge the notion within Zulu culture that the act of photographing was the prerogative of men²²⁵. Muholi further draws emphasis to how they first encountered historical images which highlighted Black women struggling and crying in pain. Thus, to counter this visual narrative, they

²²⁴ Zanele Muholi in Renée Mussai, “LETTER IV: WHERE ARE THEY? – M/OTHERING R/EVOLUTIONS” in *Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation*, (Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2022), 237

²²⁵ See Íde Corley, “An Interview with Zanele Muholi.” *Wasafiri* 31 (1). Abingdon: Routledge: 22–29, (2016: 22).

return their gaze to the camera lens with a sense of existential defiance that marks them as both Black and queer. In this regard, Muholi understands the value of the photograph as historical evidence and is clearly intending to usurp it and script a counter-history that can imagine Black women otherwise.

Most of Muholi's photography is titled in their native language of isiZulu as though to assert the language as a space for radical knowledge production and as a form of redress to apartheid's history of linguistic oppression²²⁶. Whilst Muholi identifies as gender-nonconforming and prefers gender pronouns; they/them/theirs— they are careful to note that more specific terms denoting gender nonconformity and queerness do not exist in their Zulu language. Muholi explains; "I identify as a human being at this stage because of gender fluidity, and to avoid being confused by what the society expects out of us. I came out as a same-gender loving person, but because there was no Zulu name for it, I was called a lesbian. But we move on, transpire, transgress, and transform in many ways: so I'm just human".²²⁷ It is interesting that Muholi chooses the words "transpire, transgress, and transform" as though to evoke a form of trans poetics— mapping the intersections of Blackness and transness and an understanding of gender as mutable²²⁸. This fluid understanding of gender is something that I further observe as the enactment of the otherwise in that Muholi refuses to be confined to rigid notions of gender. Furthermore, their use of the Zulu language is a form decolonial strategy that eschews the colonizing effects of the

²²⁶ In chapter one of this dissertation, I cite Ngugi (1986) in order to make a case for Zulu language as a form of decolonial epistemology.

²²⁷ Zanele Muholi and Raquel Willis (2019), *Zanele Muholi Forever Changed the Image of Black Queer South Africans* in Out Magazine. <https://www.out.com/art/2019/4/23/zanele-muholi-forever-changed-image-black-queer-south-africans>

²²⁸ This idea is illuminated in Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017). Drawing from Hortense Spillers concept of "ungendering", Snorton contends that since the antebellum era Black people have and continue to experience gender as an unstable identity category.

English language. isiZulu in this regard becomes a subversive strategy that defines gender otherwise and enacts Black queer possibility.

Falling in line with Saidiya Hartman's school of *waywardness*, Muholi's enactment of Black queer possibility, becomes "the attempt to elude capture by never settling". A way to escape "the paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. A claim to the right to opacity. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies"²²⁹. In a poetic love-letter to Muholi and their photography, Renee Mussai meditates on Muholi's visual archive as an enactment of the 'otherwise'. She muses:

"Other/wise...Both a proposition and a promise: imbued with fertile, alternate potentialities and indigenous knowledges. To me [Zanele Muholi's] visual activism and photography is birthed from the intimate communal private/public spheres that prioritize the 'otherwise' as an imaginative, generative site of defiance; queerness not only exists within it but fuels and empowers, defends, proclaims and propagates it"²³⁰.

Thus, in latter parts of my discussion, I shall further expand on Muholi's self-portraiture as a form of queer archive and the visual enactment of the *otherwise*. I contend that Muholi's form of archiving becomes a practice of visual dissent and insurgent world-building.

Zanele Muholi was born during the 1970s, a period that served as the height of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Thus, they are a part of a generation that intimately remembers racial

²²⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 227-8.

²³⁰ Muholi, Zanele, Sarah Allen, Yasufumi Nakamori, Candice Jansen, Pamela Dlungwana, Renée Mussai, et al. *Zanele Muholi*. Edited by Sarah Allen & Yasufumi Nakamori. (London, England: Tate Publishing, 2020), 57.

segregation as enforced by laws, prior to the country's transition into a democracy and the neoliberal project of "rainbow nation" building. This is important to point out as it directly contributes to how Muholi understands the visual project as one that is indeed deeply political in that it exists within the folds of history-making. Attesting to this they assert: "I want to be counted in history. I want to produce that history... History could easily be projected and produced by those who live it...speaking resistance, speaking existence".²³¹ Thus, to affirm the existence of queer identities in South Africa's history, Muholi is indeed enacting a radical form of resistance to erasure, particularly against homophobic conceptions of history that have sought to determine queerness as "unAfrican"²³². Various studies have well documented that fundamental to the South African apartheid project was a vigilant policing of sex and sexuality²³³. With this in mind, Muholi's visual activism not only serves as a rupture to the silenced histories of Black queer existence, but it also further serves as a form of queer archival practice that imagines history *otherwise*.

To position Muholi's photography as a form of queer archival practice I would like to offer clarity to how I deploy the concept of an archival presence. The often-ephemeral nature of queer life necessitates a creative approach to archiving thus, artists have been central players in the queer

²³¹ Art 21, 2003. *Zanele Muholi* in "Johannesburg" - Season 9 – "Art in the Twenty-First Century" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmFo4jYGFEo>

²³² See Nadine Lake, "Black Lesbian Bodies - Reflections on a Queer South African Archive." *Africa Insight* 44 (1): 69–83, 2014.

²³³ See Edwin Cameron, "Unapprehended Felons: Gays and Lesbians and the Law in South Africa." *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. Eds. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron. New York: Routledge: 89–98, (1995): 93; Epprecht Marc, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. *Hungochani*. 2nd ed. (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 147.; Neville Hoad, "Introduction" in *Sex and Politics in South Africa*. Ed. Neville Hoad, Karen Martin, and Graeme Reid. (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005): 14–25, 16. and Brenna Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom*. 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xii.

archival turn towards mediating radical archival politics²³⁴. Art history scholar Mattie Hough²³⁵ provides an enthralling study that considers art activism and contemporary photography as being feminist and queer archival practices. To make this case, they depart from the theoretical interventions posed by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Jacques Derrida's lecture *Archive Fever* and cite these as some of the earliest examples of scholarship that complicated the notion of "the archive" so that it may exceed the material bounds of institutional collections. Building upon this framework, I deploy this radical definitional approach through a consideration of the necessity to decolonize and subvert hegemonic understandings of history as they have often muted and erased Black life. I consider that due to the institutional neglect and erasure of Black women a decolonial approach to scholarship ought to contend with questions of materiality in order to contemplate the role played by Muholi's photography and self-portraiture in producing narratives that are able to collapse colonial framings of the archive which often privilege tangible records and abstracted sites of collection.

Hough builds upon Art historian Sara Callahan to demonstrate how Foucault's theoretical convictions influenced an archival turn in scholarship that impacted contemporary artist production and curatorial practice. They explicate that Foucault altered the understanding of the archive by contending that it shifts from it being a physical repository and an intellectual concept to one that was metaphorical in its approach towards knowledge production. With this in mind, Callahan observes that the "literal, material archive was no longer understood or used in the same ways as in previous forms of history writing where traces of the past were puzzled together into a

²³⁴Ann Cvetkovich, "Artists in the Archives: Ulrike Müller's Herstory Inventory and the Lesbian Herstory Archives" in *GLQ* 29 (2): 183–214, (2023: 186).

²³⁵Mattie Hough, *Zanele Muholi, Dayna Danger, and Melody Melamed: Queer Visual Activism Through Contemporary Photography*. (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2023).

coherent story”²³⁶. Given the contentious history of the camera as a technological apparatus of colonial capture and surveillance, I observe that Muholi is able to mobilize subversive creative strategies towards their self-documentation. Thus, by creating photographic counter-hegemonic histories, Muholi essentially creates visual narratives that can also be considered as an archival repository that is marked by the aesthetics of an *elsewhere*. Therefore, given the exclusionary and ivory-tower sensibility that characterizes traditional archival institutions, the visual archive created by Muholi serves a pedagogical function that is far more accessible and comprehensible for scholars who want to imagine history through the decolonial possibilities of an elsewhere.

While Muholi has an extensive visual archive, this chapter specifically focuses on their self-portraiture in *Somnyama Ngonyama* as a form of queer archive and a visual destabilization of apartheid histories. Art Historian, Rael Jero Salley asserts that: “In its earliest forms, photography in South Africa depicted people in terms of three dominant categories of representation—ethnography, portraiture, and documentary—each with its own institutional and cultural associations. Consequently, in early examples from South Africa’s vexed and controversial visual archive, it is through anthropological and ethnographic frameworks that people appear”²³⁷. In *Gender within Gender: Zanele Muholi’s Images of Trans Being and Becoming*, Gabeba Baderoon echoes this violent history of photography by explaining that:

“South Africa has a tradition dating from the colonial period under the Dutch of using identity documents to stifle people’s movements. This is the history of the image as capture, as arrest. Under apartheid, the most intrusive and damaging form of state control was the enforcement of the pass laws, through which Black people

²³⁶ Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 63.

²³⁷ Raél Jero. Salley, “Zanele Muholi’s Elements of Survival” in *African Arts* 45 (4): 58–69, 2012: 64.

were forced to carry an identity document, the hated “passbook”, or *dompas*. The passbook with its identity photograph was therefore the state’s primary instrument of disenfranchisement, racial division, and restriction of movement”²³⁸.

This is the visual history that Muholi is responding to and in their photographic response *Somnyama Ngonyama* presents self-portraits that explode stereotypes of African women while evoking them. I am particularly drawn to the medium of self-portraiture as a form of autobiography that demonstrates the importance of subjectivity and personal experience in all responses of history and culture²³⁹. Each image becomes a site of memory and an artefact of memory, wherein Muholi is able to document their personal experiences of moving through the world as a queer body. This self-representation also upends the ethnographic and voyeuristic history of documenting Black people through the colonial machine of capture. Furthermore, whilst much of Muholi’s visual activism inevitably brings light to the sociopolitical marginalization faced particularly by queer people who live in South African townships, I believe that it would be amiss to only focus on this as it not only “erases the heterogeneity of queer life in South Africa but also reifies white supremacist constructions of township space as marked and defined by marginality and Black pathology”²⁴⁰. As demonstrated in other chapters of this dissertation project, my work seeks to

²³⁸ Gabeba Baderoon, “‘Gender within Gender’: Zanele Muholi’s Images of Trans Being and Becoming” in *Feminist Studies* 37 (2): 390–416, (2011: 404).

²³⁹ Farah Jasmine. Griffin. *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics during World War I*, (New York: Basic Civitas, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2013), 3.

²⁴⁰ Z’ététoile Imma, “(Re)visualizing Black Lesbian Lives, (trans)masculinity, and Township Space in the Documentary Work of Zanele Muholi.” in *Journal of Lesbian Studies*: 219–41, (2017:221). The role of the township as a location for image making is central in Muholi’s work. Through the ongoing series entitled; *Faces and Phases* (2014-present), Muholi photographs everyday ordinary queer people whose imagery challenges homophobic conceptions of history. Through these images, Muholi is able to make commentary on issues such as corrective rape—the hate crime that is carried out with the motivation of converting LGBTI individuals to heterosexuality. It is important to note that this term does not come without criticism from scholars such as Zethu Matebeni (2012) who rightfully argues against the usage of the term by noting that “such terminology can imply or shift the blame from the perpetrator to the victim” as the phrase reifies the idea that perpetrator is curing transgressive behavior “for the good of dominant culture” (80).

meditate on the visual politics of *aliveness*²⁴¹ as a way to imagine Blackness otherwise from scripts of death and negation.

In a deliberate attempt to not reproduce the violence of anti-Black logics that often remain preoccupied with Black negation, I instead enact an intervention that is marked by Black avowal and the insistence of the Black imagination as a map and atlas to the *otherwise*. As Z'etoile Imma is careful to remind us: “many Black lesbian survivors of violence and LGBTI rights have asserted that the representation of Black [queer] lives needs to take place outside discourses of hate crime”²⁴². Thus, whilst Muholi’s visual activism and photography emerges out of a need to counter the violent histories of queer marginalization, my study seeks to instead bring our focus to how Muholi’s self-portraiture functions as a visual archive and enacts a form of decolonial memory work collapsed into the conjure of a queer imagination that is preoccupied with insurgent histories and radical *elsewheres*.

The photography and art activism of Zanele Muholi is emblematic of a Black queer imagination that is necessitated by a significant cultural turn in Black visual cultures—where the Black queer emerges as a hypervisible and destabilizing presence against discursive practices of gender and sexuality. Here, Blackness is interpreted as an essential template of gendered and sexual “deviance” that is limited to the negation of a state of being²⁴³. With this in mind, it is clear that the contemporary moment we find ourselves in is marked by the impossibility of Blackness to be defined in normative terms as far as gender and sexuality are concerned. Following Zakiyyah

²⁴¹ Kevin Quashie deems “Black aliveness” as a rich and dimensional interiority of being. Similarly, Muholi’s self-portraiture can be read as a turn towards the exploration of Black interiority as a way to subvert the violence of rendering Blackness and queerness through exteriorizing and spectacular modes.

²⁴² Z’etoile Imma, “(Re)visualizing Black Lesbian Lives, (trans)masculinity, and Township Space in the Documentary Work of Zanele Muholi.” in *Journal of Lesbian Studies*: 219–41, (2017:226).

²⁴³ See Zakiyyah Iman. Jackson, “Waking Nightmares” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2: 357–63. (2011).

Jackson's instruction in *Waking Nightmares*, she argues that: due to slavery and colonialism's commodification of Black people's bodies, gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories in any attempt to articulate Black queer difference. Such a predicament thus necessitates for an ethical disinvestment in heteropatriarchy and its ideological underpinnings within canonical studies in the field of vision. It is from this vantage point that this chapter uses the work of Muholi to lean into Black feminism and Queer theory as arenas that open frameworks, methodologies and epistemologies for a decolonized field of vision—that necessitates the production of a counter-history and an archive for narratives that are *otherwise* or *elsewhere* from colonialization.

To locate Muholi's photography as a form of art activism and the enactment of a queer archive, I lean into the work of Rinaldo Walcott. In "Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies", Walcott asserts: "The perspective that art is meant to do something does not deaestheticize art; rather, it suggests that the aesthetics of art are political scripts and narratives of a kind... Artists offer us evidence of the past and present with a sensibility of a future-possible — a process"²⁴⁴. In an anti-Black world and inevitably the anti-Black metrics that inform visual culture, Muholi belongs to a lineage of artists who imagine their being and likeness to project Black visual futures that are shaped by possibility and a spectacular *otherwise*. Because they intimately know what it means and feels like to be disposed of, to be disregarded, to be invisible—they are committed to seeing and imagining themselves radically and *otherwise*. In the next phase of my discussion, I examine the ways in which Muholi mobilizes aesthetic features such as hair and skin as ways of challenging anti-Black ordering and racist histories which have associated Blackness with animality.

²⁴⁴ Rinaldo Walcott, *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies* (London, Ontario, Canada: Insomniac Press, 2016): 43.

Returning the Gaze: Muholi Meets *Dark Sousveillance*



Figure 31: *Somnyama Ngonyama II*, Oslo, 2015, photographed by Zanele Muholi, Stevenson Gallery, http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/somnyama_ngonyama2_oslo_2015.html

In the image above, Muholi once again turns the lens on themselves and adopts their signature contrast to highlight their Blackness as an inescapable fact of their representation which the onlooker is forced to confront. Again, Muholi implicates the spectator for deriving any form of “visual pleasure”²⁴⁵ by gazing directly at the camera as though to upend its power as a technology of capture. I think it is significant that Muholi strips the image of any color as this becomes a form of disentangling themselves from the possibility of being consumed for visual pleasure. This picture seems to adhere to conventions of the portrait mode in that the composition focuses attention to Muholi who is the focal subject of the image. Their eyebrows arch disapprovingly, and their lips are solemnly pressed, refusing to surrender a smile—this is not a pose but a photographic confrontation. Muholi is staging a confrontation against racist histories that have associated Blackness with animality. The mane on their head mimics that of a lion, a nod to the title of the portrait; *Sonyama Ngonyama II*. As a theoretical nod to this history in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an anti-Black World*, Zakiyyah Jackson asserts that:

“African diasporic cultural production does not coalesce into a unified tradition that merely seeks inclusion into liberal humanist conceptions of “the human” but, rather, frequently alters the meaning and significance of being (human) and engages in imaginative practices of worlding from the perspective of a history of blackness’s bestialization and thingification: the process of imagining black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero, coupled with the violent imposition of colonial myths and racial hierarchy”²⁴⁶.

²⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey. 1975. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen 16.3 Autumn. pp. 6-18.

²⁴⁶ Zakiyyah Iman. Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1.

Muholi’s “matted” hair calls for a rigorous engagement and confrontation with how “racism posits cleavages in womanhood such that [B]lack womanhood is made to be a gender apart, an other gender”²⁴⁷. By deploying the theoretical interventions posed by Jackson, this study is able to move beyond the limits of representation as a framework in order to understand what is really at stake for Muholi’s photography and their visual grammar. Thus, Muholi’s aesthetic strategies “reveal the extent to which western science and visual art share and mutually constitute what is racialized, gendered, and sexualized imperial economy of aesthetics, desire, and affect”²⁴⁸. As mentioned in earlier parts of this paper, Muholi seems to intuitively understand themselves as falling within gender paradigms that cannot be contained by the English language, especially if these very frameworks cannot contend with the boundlessness of Blackness and Black womanhood. Thus, a rigorous engagement with their aesthetic strategies reveal what Jackson deems as the potential for mutation beyond a mode of thought and representation that challenges anti-Black ordering. The inevitable outcome then points us in the direction of a radical *elsewhere* and a gender that is *otherwise*.

It is also important to note that Muholi’s series title and the title of the portrait above: *Somnyama Ngonyama* works in concert with Zulu ontologies that in fact uphold ethical inter-relationship between the human and animal species. Unlike ecologies of anti-Blackness that purport to divide human from animal, “Hail the Dark Lioness” evokes a sense of pride and the associational link between lions and royalty. Thus, this complicates the idea that Muholi’s aesthetic strategies be in congruent terms with anti-Black logics that associate animality with monstrosity. Instead, Muholi pushes us towards the ethical bind one must contend with as a viewer—as the

²⁴⁷ Zakiyyah Iman. Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 159

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 167.

interpretation of their photographs seem to equally implicate the viewer in the fetishistic voyeurism perpetuated by technologies of capture. With this in mind, the parts that are to follow in this chapter shall turn our attention to how theories of *dark sousveillance* can further point us in the directions of an *otherwise* by accounting for how Muholi's photographic practice challenges disciplinary formations of the gaze.

Engulfed in the abyss of blackness as though they were “playing in the dark”²⁴⁹ Muholi is rendered recognizable only through the white color contrasted in their eyes and the monochrome highlights from their hair. This becomes an enactment of what Simone Browne conceives as *Dark sousveillance*, which is a strategy employed to render oneself as out of sight or unrecognizable. Thus, instead of reducing Muholi's extra darkened skin as a performance of blackface, I mobilize *Dark sousveillance* as a framework that gives room for us to imagine how liberatory potential can also be enacted by the refusal to render oneself as visually legible. Brown develops this framework by building on Fanon's lectures on surveillance to explore themes of escape and Blackness. Deploying the Fanonian concept of epidermalization, Browne's study immediately announces itself as a part of a genealogy in Black visual studies, whereby race is conceived as a social fact imposed on Black life.

To situate Browne as an instructive interlocutor in my project this part of my discussion usurps *dark sousveillance* as a compelling framework in that I apply it to help me determine the ways in which Muholi subverts racialized and anti-Black understandings of Black skin. Furthermore, Muholi constructs a pathway that is otherwise from the histories of surveillance that undergird visual technologies. This is achieved by the decision to turn the camera to themselves. In this regard, they are not necessarily being surveilled or ‘captured’ by the privileged other—

²⁴⁹ This is a nod to Toni Morrison's text: *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992)

instead they are staging the terms of their photographic capture through the form of self-documentation. Muholi attests to this by stating: “This self-representation and self-love also upends the ethnographic and voyeuristic history of documenting people of color and diaspora through the colonial machine and legacy, and I think that absolutely needs to be redirected through self-representation and power”²⁵⁰.

What is of interest to me is in ascertaining how Muholi’s self-portraiture can play against the grain of the camera being historically positioned as a technological tool of racialized surveillance. Consequently, I find Browne useful in helping me to think through what happens when Muholi’s Blackness enters the frame. Working against the grain of white canonical violence, Browne postulates a critical interposition that looks towards the hold of the ship as a place of formation for the surveilling white gaze. By using the ship as a metaphor to explore themes of Black flight and escape, Browne helps us to understand the liberatory potential and the *otherwise* that is embedded in how Blackness eludes photographic capture. To this end, Browne seeks to highlight the limits of Foucault’s Panopticon which has often been used to account for the disciplinary gaze as the archetypical power of modernity²⁵¹. Through these theoretical considerations, I interpret Muholi’s unflinching gaze at the camera as emblematic of Black feminist refusal and a form of “Black looks”²⁵². Essentially, in *Somnyama Ngonyama II*, Muholi mobilizes the aesthetics of a Black gaze, Black skin and Black hair as radical technologies for Black flight and escape. This enactment of refuting capture propels them to a visual counter-histories and futurities of an *elsewhere*.

²⁵⁰ Muholi, Zanele, Sarah Allen, Yasufumi Nakamori, Candice Jansen, Pamela Dlungwana, Renée Mussai, et al. *Zanele Muholi*. Edited by Sarah Allen & Yasufumi Nakamori. London, England: Tate Publishing, 2020.

²⁵¹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 24.

²⁵² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992) and Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Elsewhere and Otherwise: Queer Black Feminist Visual Grammars



Figure 32: *MaID I, Syracuse 2015*, photographed by Zanele Muholi, Stevenson Gallery, http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/somnyama/maid_syracuse_2015.html

In *MaID I Syracuse 2015*, Muholi is framed in two parts as though they were mid-*flight*, moving towards an attempt to escape capture. As I have demonstrated in earlier parts of my discussion on *dark sousveillance*, Muholi's practice of self-portraiture is an attempt to evade the colonizing effect of the camera as a technological apparatus of capture. This form of flight and fugitive movement is further performed through the language deployed in the portrait titles— be it in the use of isiZulu as a form epistemic disobedience or developing alternative meanings of words. For example, the above image is entitled *MaID* which can be read as an acronym denoting to the words: My Identity or read differently as 'maid', the quotidian and demeaning name given to all subservient Black women in South Africa. Reflecting on Muholi's use of performative language, Nomusa Makhubu asserts that:

“English hegemony is, for most former colonial second-language speakers, a silencing apparatus. Generally, in South Africa, those who cannot speak it, are considered illiterate and, in effect, excluded from skilled work and relegated to cheap unskilled labor. This exclusion in South Africa contributes to the trivialization and silencing of Nguni languages. It also becomes the language of rebelling against its own colonial history”²⁵³.

Thus, by deconstructing the word *maid* to perform the function of a double-meaning, Muholi is able to use language as another site to stage rebellions of an ‘otherwise’ against colonial and apartheid history.

In the above image Muholi draws us back to their signature attention to gradients of black, using heightened contrast and precise lighting to accentuate their bodily features and the visual textures of the photograph. In the first frame, they have their gaze transfixed away from the camera, titillating our gaze towards their hands in white latex gloves, grabbing at their own neck. The decision to turn their gaze downward already assumes the state of their powerlessness thus directing the viewer to the latex gloves that press against their neck. Their shoulders are slightly hunched forward, and their arms appear tense— to accentuate the idea of a weighted strangling around their neck. However, their face is resolute with an expressionless side stare that gives very little emotion away. Could this be a look of indignation instead?

The ambiguity in their facial expression already challenges the initial impulse which was to ascribe them to a state of powerlessness because it would be more accurate to associate indignation with defiance. It is defiant to choose to not appear horrified or in pain as you are being

²⁵³Nomusa Makhubu, *Performing Blackface: Reflections on Zanele Muholi’s Somnyama Ngonyama. Decolonial Propositions*. Issue 49. OnCurating.org. (2021: 112).

strangled around the neck. Speaking on the significance of using their own face in this self-portraiture series, Muholi asserts: “I was thinking about how acts of violence are intimately connected to our faces. Remember that when a person is violated, it frequently starts with the face: it’s the face that disturbs the perpetrator”²⁵⁴. Thus, I interpret the gesture of their strangling hands as an attempt to speak against the suffocating nature of the patriarchal violence that is often perpetuated against women and queer femmes. There is a haunting quality to this image, and it is this haunting that becomes a direct confrontation with histories of violence and the insistent precarity of Black life. Muholi however urges us to not turn away from histories that haunt us. Instead, they appear to assert that by directly ‘looking’ into the folds of these horrible and violent histories, we may begin to stage a confrontation against history to imagine otherwise.

In directing us towards their use of white latex gloves and how they may be interpreted otherwise Muholi states: “You might look at the latex gloves and think of balloons and play, rather than the constraints of work and domesticity or the need to breathe” (Berger, 2018). With the exclusion of the latex gloves on their hands, Muholi is dressed in nothing except for *isicholo*, a hat traditionally reserved for married Zulu women and often worn during special ceremonial occasions. Thus, to coopt this signature hat and Zulu cultural artifact as a prop to express quotidian queer being, becomes a form of critical fabulation and imagining otherwise. This is a method defined by Saidiya Hartman as writing against the archive, telling impossible stories to amplify the impossibility of their telling, speculative histories²⁵⁵.

²⁵⁴ Mussai, Renée. “Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama” in *Hail the Dark Lioness: Renée Mussai in Conversation with Zanele Muholi*, with Additional Contributions by Unoma Azuah, Milisuthando Bongela, Ama Josephine Budge, [and 21 Others]. First edition. New York, N.Y: Aperture, 2018.

²⁵⁵ Saidiya Hartman 2019.

Muholi queers the visual grammar of Zulu womanhood and in effect is able to inscribe *wayward* and *otherwise* formations of Black being. Tavia Nyong'o builds on this by constructing the framework: *afro-fabulation* (2019) which he describes as "the persistent reappearance of that which was never meant to appear but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation"²⁵⁶. Here, Muholi is working against a homophobic history that has considered queerness as being unAfrican thus to co-opt the function of *isicholo* as a decorative prop to document their "queerness" is indeed of from of critical fabulation and afro-fabulation. It is a form of deconstructing Zulu womanhood in order to construct a form of being that is otherwise.

It is also interesting to observe that Muholi is donned in dainty stud earrings as though to signal once again to notions of beauty and femininity. As I have demonstrated in earlier parts of this chapter, Muholi continuously gestures at these categories in order to provide commentary for how they have functioned to oppress and exclude Black women from the visual archive. In this instance however, I propose that Muholi seeks to critique the function of beauty especially if desirability makes one vulnerable to patriarchal violence. The latex white gloves around her neck seem to signal this ominous violence. However, Muholi performs defiance through various bodily gestures and in the second frame they gaze directly into the camera lens, wearing the same white gloves and *isicholo* to gesture that we understand the intersection between beauty and violence, otherwise.

This time around they have their hands formed into fists, as though to channel and assume a boxing posture—a clear signal at their defiance and willingness to fight off any threat. Another point of departure here is that Muholi is deliberate to reveal their naked chest. Deborah Willis draws us to a distinction between the categories of "nude" and "naked" stating that the distinction

²⁵⁶ Tavia Nyongó, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 3.

is important as it evokes different connotations of eroticism. “The nude body is an aesthetically pleasing, idealized rendering, while the “naked” is a more realistic, less flattering depiction”²⁵⁷. Willis makes this distinction in order to account for historical racial classifications in photography, whereby the Black female body was constructed and depicted as “naked”. In the image above, I find the signaling of patriarchal violence as too ominous to even begin to imagine any kind of ethical consideration of the erotic. After all, Muholi’s work often contends in very explicate ways with the structural violence of “corrective rape” that is often perpetrated against queer women at disproportionate rates. Thus, Muholi stages a critical intervention in the intersections of beauty, nakedness and violence. This is a staging of beauty that is otherwise from the one we see in *Bester*. I. As a transition, I would now like to consider how Zulu cultural codes and language imagine nakedness otherwise.

The isicholo hat in the portrait above signals towards the cultural specificity of Zulu womanhood. Thus, it is important to contend with how nakedness is understood in indigenous Zulu culture as it does not immediately signify the erotic or vulgar. Instead, nakedness in indigenous Zulu culture has often been a sign of pride performed to signal towards notions of “purity” and virginity. Whilst purity culture in western and Christian prisms is often a function of patriarchal policing of women’s bodies, I would like to suggest that this logic is not applicable to indigenous Zulu customs. I think it is important to ground this imagery within the context of how the body is framed and understood in precolonial African cultures—particularly those of the Zulu people. Western scholars often make an oversight in terms of adequately accounting for how Muholi’s identity as a Zulu person positions their visual grammar as a form of otherwise and a disidentification to hegemonic visual scripts.

²⁵⁷ Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 39.

It is with this thinking in mind that I utilize the interventions offered by José Muñoz in the text: *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. I read Black queer performance in the self-portraiture of Muholi as a form of theorizing without words and therefore a form of decolonial praxis. To combat the white heteropatriarchal disciplinary formations of the visual archive, Muholi uses Black queer imagination to ask questions of Black queer life and invention that challenge us to move beyond the binaries of oppression and resistance. By drawing from Muñoz's theories, I grapple with the ways in which we can read the two-part image: *MaID I* as operating within the rubric of disidentification, in that Muholi seeks to evoke and disarm the monstrosity of how the colonial visual archive frames the naked Black body. Muñoz's theory of disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse²⁵⁸. Thus, by applying Muñoz's theory of disidentification, we can begin to imagine the very notion of hegemony otherwise. To this end, Antonio Gramsci problematizes an absolute understanding of hegemony and instead frames it as a process that is never complete therefore making 'dominance' a misleading description. Primarily, it is crucial to understand and acknowledge that in order for ideas or ideology to be regarded as dominant; requires for such ideas to be pervasive and accepted in society. Therefore, hegemonic forces exist in a constant pull and push struggle over power and dominance²⁵⁹. Thus Muholi's visual grammar seeks to consistently contest hegemonic visual grammars.

As a strategy that enacts Black queer survival, disidentification is framed as having the potential to work both within and outside the dominant public sphere at the same time. However,

²⁵⁸ José Esteban. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Cultural Studies of the Americas, V. 2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

²⁵⁹ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Trans. and ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

this framework pushes us to contend with the fact that at times when marginalized identities resist normative identifications, this can be performed in excessive ways that can further render them as spectacle. This begs the question, how does Muholi contest hegemonic histories of sexual and racial violence without reproducing conditions and a visual grammar that render them as hypervisible? In the attempt to grapple with the abovementioned question, I will now transition to Nicole Fleetwood's framework of "excess flesh" to reconcile with how Muholi flirts with visual enactments that render the Black body as a spectacle. I shall also use this as a Segway towards a brief discussion of developing a vocabulary of "feeling" in order to consider how Muholi visually mobilizes the affective power that is rendered by Blackness so as to imagine a visual vocabulary of the otherwise.

Troubling Feelings: Developing a Black Feminist Grammar of Feeling Images



Figure 33, *Basizeni XI, Cassilhaus, North Carolina, 2016*, photographed by Zanele Muholi, Stevenson Gallery, <https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/2298/work/13>

We cannot discount that part of the appeal to Muholi's work is their ability to visually mobilize the affective power that is rendered by Blackness. Thus, I begin this part of my discussion with a critical question that is posed by Art Historian and Visual Culture scholar, Nomusa Makhubu in the article: *Performing Blackface: Reflections on Zanele Muholi's Somnyama Ngonyama*. In this article, Makhubu stages a radical intervention that holds Muholi accountable for what they describe as images that "flirt dangerously with racist iconography"²⁶⁰. Using Fleetwood's framework of non-iconicity as a point of departure, I explore the possibility of how Muholi's performance of Blackness and queerness can be read beyond a singular image or sign that fixes Blackness within static definitional categories. Fleetwood departs from a premise that perceives the Black body as a challenge and troubling configuration within the field of vision. She defines and proposes non-iconicity as an aesthetic and theoretical position that lessens the weight placed on the Black visual to address misrepresentation—a movement away from the singularity and significance placed on instantiations of Blackness to resolve that which cannot be resolved. Elucidating this this point, Fleetwood asserts that:

"Visual representations of Blacks are meant to substitute for the real experiences of Black subjects. The visual manifestations of Blackness through technological apparatus or through a material experience of locating Blackness in public space equates with an ontological account of Black subjects. Visuality, and vision to an extent, in relationship to race becomes a thong unto itself"²⁶¹.

²⁶⁰ Nomusa Makhubu (2021: 110)

²⁶¹ Nicole Fleetwood, Nicole, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

In every image I have discussed thus far, Muholi steps into the frame with their signature “blackened” skin. Utilizing Fleetwood’s concept of “excess flesh” I have been able to provide readings of Muholi’s visual grammar that are able to perceive their aesthetic choices as forms of subversive resistance and pathways to the otherwise. Fleetwood describes excess flesh as a performative strategy that is often used by Black women cultural producers—who use hypervisibility to point to the problem of the Black female body in the visual field. In the attempt to lessen the liberatory load on her framework of excess flesh, Fleetwood clarifies that the framework is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. Instead, she proposes that we understand *excess flesh* as a performative that doubles visibility to reveal the visual codes at work on the (hyper)visible body that serves as its object. However, in the consideration of Muholi’s counter visual practice, I deploy *excess flesh* with the full awareness and discomfort that it has little effect on the dominant gaze and its visibility scheme within white institutions such as the museum and gallery world. To reconcile this tension, I will now turn my attention to how Muholi’s process of photography is performed otherwise.

To destabilize the dominance that is produced in institutional structures, it is important to note that Muholi’s photographic practice also exists outside of these structures. For example, all the images in the *Somnyama Ngonyama* series are not captured in a traditional studio, instead, they are taken in various geographical locations during Muholi’s travels. Thus, Muholi uses their body as somewhat of a mobile studio. Furthermore, Muholi also has a mobile gallery that they situate in different township locations when they are photographing members of their queer community. Thus, this allows their participants to contribute to the making of their images as co-authors which destabilizes the traditional hierarchies that are produced between the photographer and “the subject”. Instead, Muholi is also quick to clarify that in instances where they are photographing

other people, they do not consider these people as subjects. Instead, they are positioned as participants. Furthermore, Muholi has been known to travel to exhibitions of their work with the participants who feature in the images being exhibited. This means that the images that make it to various museum exhibitions have also been selected through a process of negotiation. This is a process that is otherwise from traditional museum exhibitions.

As a final consideration I would like to turn towards an analysis of the photograph: *Basizeni XI* to provide a reading strategy and vocabulary of *feeling*. In this image, Muholi appears fatigued and deflated as they gaze into an elsewhere that gestures away from the gaze of the spectator. Their eyes no longer stage an unwavering defiance, instead they appear somber. The composition in the portrait directs our gaze to the seemingly weighted adornments that engulf their head and shoulders. Revealing their body only from their shoulders upwards, this time around Muholi is wrapped in what appears to be deflated bike tyres. The same material is used to wrap their head in an elaborate style that is indigenous to Black women in western and southern parts of Africa. Their profile is tilted slightly to the side, thus showing a side view of their traditional Zulu clip-on earrings known as “iziqhaza”. It is interesting that the title of this picture translates to the words: “help them”. This definitive statement signals to the sense of helplessness and desperation that is clearly marked all over Muholi’s face. I find this image to be demonstrative of the feelings of grief and mental exhaustion that are a result of the affective labor that Muholi’s visual grammar demands. Their visual photography demands a certain type of emotional and intellectual rigor from the viewer thus challenging readings that are flattening and limiting to the otherwise they have fashioned themselves.

In the first three photographs (*Bester I*, *Somnyama Ngonyama II* and *MaID I*) that I have discussed from the self-portraiture series: *Somnyama Ngonyama I* have tried to offer fabulative

and reparative readings in order to account for Muholi's visual grammar as gesturing us towards an otherwise. The images I have selected have been those that have 'affected' me with a feeling and aesthetics of queer hope. Simultaneously, the image that I have been most challenged by is the *MaID I* portrait whereby Muholi self-strangulates in a state marked by nakedness, wearing only white latex gloves and *isicholo*. The white gloves for me are what triggered the most trepidation—especially as the visual imagery wrestled to try and take me out of my convictions towards the articulation of a Black Aliveness. Whilst I was able to provide a reading that still gestures towards its provocations of patriarchal violence, I chose to steer clear from interpreting the white latex gloves in relation to histories of the medical racism that Black women have been subjected to. This is a history that is inextricably linked with how Black women's bodies came to be known and constructed within the field of vision. Thus, I leaned into the Zulu language and indigenous epistemologies to offer understandings of nakedness that are otherwise.

History determines that we cannot disentangle Black women's bodies from the historical violence that marked Sarah Baartman as a site of origin that frames how the Black body becomes understood and visualized through racial and gendered paradigms. Sarah Baartman's body tells the story of how Black women have for centuries "suffered emotional, physical, and epistemic violence at the hands of white men, history, and science"²⁶². Her legacy has been obscured to such a degree that even the accurate spelling of her name is not known. While others have referred to her as "Sara", this study hails her as "Sarah" and others choose to affectionately refer to her as "Saartjie". All these multiple spellings reveal one thing: Baartman is archivally marked and documented as a mere body with no interior world. Hers is a body "in pain, a body shamed, and a

²⁶² Simphiwe Ndlovu, "Body of Evidence: Saartjie Baartman and the Archive" in *Representation and Black Womanhood*, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 17–30, (2011 :18).

body violated”²⁶³. Given this history, Muholi’s enactment of “excess flesh” seems to bear heavy affective consequences, particularly for Black women viewers.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that given Baartman’s identity as a South African woman who was first enslaved in Cape Town prior to being forced to migrate to London and then Paris—the particularity of her identity as a “grand ancestor” makes it that much more emotionally challenging to look into the folds of her violent history. Whilst I have made the radical decision to not rehearse the history of Baartman, I have opted to pose my intellectual intervention on her by mapping a deliberate reference list—in my bibliography— of theorists who approach her legacy ethically. Leaning into the Black feminist teachings of practicing refusal, I refuse to rehearse the erasure that has continuously reproduced the obscurification of Baartman. As I have continuously hinted in various parts of this dissertation, to confront the *wake* of these violent histories is difficult emotional work particularly for Black women. Thus, this begs that we imagine Baartman’s history otherwise.

Basizeni XI is an image that forces us to contend with the weight of history through the signaling of the deflated bike tyres that entangle Muholi’s shoulders. A brief description of the image from the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University reveals that it “was created while Muholi was in residency at Cassilhaus in Chapel Hill North Carolina in 2016” and that “the image shows the artist wearing deflated bike tires found at the Scrap Exchange, a creative reuse center in Durham, North Carolina”. I make mention of this as this is another demonstration of Muholi’s *personal, intimate, tactile, and embodied* approach to photographic archiving. This is what Tina Campt refers to as the affective labor of Black precarity which is “the labor required by forms of

²⁶³ Simphiwe Ndlovu, “Body of Evidence: Saartjie Baartman and the Archive” in *Representation and Black Womanhood*, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 17–30, (2011 :18).

black visuality that image the inseparability of black pleasure, beauty, and suffering”²⁶⁴. She observes that Black visual artists (such as Muholi) who are committed to recreating the visual archive must exercise “a particular kind of curatorial care of what, on first sight, appears to be a troubling and painful collection of images”²⁶⁵.

Campt further cites that “affective labor refers to the invisible, yet intense work embedded in producing and managing our emotions (caring, listening, comforting, reassuring, smiling). This labor is gendered since it has been historically associated with female qualities and is therefore usually *expected* of women”²⁶⁶. Muholi attests to this painful labor by sharing that their practice of self-portraiture is “confrontational, an inward examination that can border on violence due to the painful memories it triggers”²⁶⁷. In the *Basize IX* Muholi appears to be pleading for their own salvation. Their gaze appears vapid from the exhaustion of having to constantly remember painful memories and histories. This image encapsulates the overwhelming feeling that takes over one as they spend sustained intimate time with these photographs or documents of historical evidence.

In the photographing of their existence and the broader frame of Black life, Muholi’s self-portraits serve as antidotes to premature Black death. Muholi often speaks of the importance of giving gratitude for being alive. Something that some might take for granted however in their existence within multiple intersections of oppression, they know too well that death is always imminent. Thus, Muholi self-documents their existence against a larger historical backdrop that has sought to render Black queer life as non-existent. Their photography becomes a site of

²⁶⁴ Tina Campt. “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal.” *Social Text* 37 (3): 25–46. (2019: 26).

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 28.

²⁶⁷Renée Mussai, “Zanele Muholi On Resistance” in *Aperture*. 2018
<https://aperture.org/editorial/muholi-interview/>

remembrance. bell hooks reminds us: “the word *remember* (*re-member*) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye”²⁶⁸. In the same breath, it is painful to remember...So, what “feeling does the work [of Muholi] provoke?”²⁶⁹. For the complicated nature of Muholi’s visual grammar, it seems more appropriate to end with this question instead of any definitive declarations.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have provided careful analysis of Muholi’s self-portraiture series entitled *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Utilizing the insurgent frameworks and methods provided by Black feminist thought and Queer theories, I have been able to contend with how Muholi’s visual activism and photography are compelling for rendering Black queerness as a part of South Africa’s visual archive. Through a commemoration of their mother’s legacy as a domestic worker, Muholi is also able to foreground memory as a decolonial tool for exploding and destabilizing apartheid’s visual archive to create counter-histories pertaining to Black women’s labor, servitude and notions of beauty and femininity.

As Muholi has stated: “I photograph myself to remind thyself that you exist”²⁷⁰, I believe that this statement by Muholi needs to be stretched further because what Muholi is calling for is

²⁶⁸ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: New Press, 1995), 64.

²⁶⁹ Nomusa Makhubu (2021: 120).

²⁷⁰ See Art 21, *Zanele Muholi* in “Johannesburg” - Season 9 – “Art in the Twenty-First Century”, 2003. Accessed March 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmFo4jYGFEO>

more than a project of Black queer representation. Instead, Muholi's photography takes on the role of critical and fabulative archiving of a world that was never meant to survive and never meant to appear—an archive otherwise and elsewhere. Through the practice of visually documenting their existence as they move through different parts of the world, Muholi's self-portraiture produces “Black subversions of sexual and gender conformity that prove excessive, disorderly, or simply unintelligible to an external gaze”²⁷¹. Indeed, Muholi's photography conjures an archive of Black women and queer identities eluding photographic capture to offer a visual archive that critically fabulates and imagines otherwise. Through this radical engagement with the camera, Muholi challenges the entire technologic apparatus of capture. Ultimately, I have utilized the self-portraiture of Muholi to lean into Black feminism and Queer theory as arenas that open frameworks, methodologies, and epistemologies for a decolonized field of vision—that necessitates the production of a counter-history and an archive for narratives that are *otherwise* or *elsewhere* from colonialization.

I have also leaned into isiZulu as a language and its indigenous cultural codes in to reveal some of the limited ways that Western scholars often frame Muholi's work, which is marked by an oversight of not contextualizing Muholi within their cultural identity as a Zulu person. My application of Zulu epistemologies has been able to position Muholi's photography and their visual grammar as a form of otherwise and a disidentification to hegemonic visual scripts.

Finally, I have mobilized decolonial frameworks and theories that have problematized absolute understandings of hegemony and instead framed it as a process that is never complete. Therefore making ‘dominance’ a misleading description. Consequently, it is crucial to understand

²⁷¹ Tavia Nyongó, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.

and acknowledge that for ideas or ideology to be regarded as dominant, this requires for such ideas to be pervasive and accepted in society. Therefore, as per Antonio Gramsci's teachings, hegemonic forces exist in a constant pull and push struggle over power and dominance. Thus, Muholi's visual grammar seeks to consistently contest hegemonic visual grammars.

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CONCLUSION

And I know that when I wrote “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” that I wrote it with a feeling of hopelessness. I was very emotional when I wrote it. I was on the verge of crying about what I was writing about. And I was trying to explain what seemed to me impossible to explain.

-Hortense Spillers²⁷²

This is for Spillers. A chosen living ancestor. She has given so many of us a *map* and an *atlas* to give words to something that exceeds language.

I am part of a generation that grew up during Nelson Mandela’s so-called “post racial” democratic South Africa. We were hailed as the *born-frees* for we had just escaped the reign of apartheid which had ended in 1994. Songs such as Brenda Fassie’s “Black president” became emblematic for why “representation mattered”. With the advent of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, South Africa became the globe’s favorite reference for racial progress and reconciliation. Later in 2006, with the introduction of the Civil Union Act, South Africa would then become the first country to legalize queer unions, and again, this was seen as a radical step for the rights and visibility of queer people. However, whilst legislation shifted, the freedom dream we had been promised remained deferred. With this growing painful realization, I began this dissertation project with high hopes and expectations for representation as a framework, that I thought had to bear some kind of corrective and redeemable outcome for a long visual history that has functioned continuously to negate and pathologize Black women. However, very soon I realized that most debates around representation and identity politics could not resist the allure of falling into

²⁷² Hortense Spillers in “Whatcha Gonna Do? Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’: A Conversation with Hortense Spillers.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35 (1–2): 299–309, 2007.

essentialist and binary pitfalls that often do not move beyond notions of the positive and negative. Furthermore, what captured my interest in visual studies was that an engagement with the field's history quickly exposed how Black negation and specifically the Black woman as *aberration* was deeply embedded in visual technologies and epistemologies. To ascertain how image makers contend with this history, I became drawn to artists whose creative work I perceived as performing the function of theory whilst simultaneously creatively articulating pathways for decoloniality and counter-historiography.

As an artist-scholar, I have grown to lean into my creative intuition and to trust that the ability to tap into these intuitive and creative registers is in fact a powerful resource for my scholarship. Thus, in selecting the artists for my project's theoretical undertaking, I pulled from both an intuitive plane and a deep understanding for how Black visual art is able to facilitate radical intellectual transformation and deep spiritual healing. Thus, the study of Black visibility seems to carry high stakes especially if we are to consider that we continue to live in the wake and the afterlives of violent anti-Black histories that continue to necessitate Black feminist vocabularies for individual and collective repair. Thus, through the pages of this study, I have positioned Julie Dash, Sarah Maldoror, Xoliswa Sithole and Zanele Muholi as image-makers who offer us methods and visual grammars for a Black feminist and decolonial aesthetic.

The work of challenging and countering invisibility is difficult work therefore, as a creative media practitioner, I have had first-hand experience in observing the paucity at which Black women's creative work is both circulated and celebrated. Consequently, I found it incredibly important to include the works of artists such as Sarah Maldoror and Xoliswa Sithole who have both not enjoyed much mainstream visibility. Whilst studies on Sarah Maldoror's work have begun

to gain some modest traction, Xoliswa Sithole still remains to be excluded in the realm of academic scholarship.

Since this project is conceived from a space of being intimately connected with history, I was faced with what I initially thought was a challenge in terms of accessing institutional archives. Whilst I was not able to garner resources that would make it possible for me to travel in order to conduct some of my research, I soon realized that this challenge was in fact an opportunity to start thinking differently and creatively about what in fact could constitute as an archive. Thus, I leaned into the creative productions of these artists and realized how important these were as counter-historiographies and archival repositories. On the opposite spectrum however, the reality of navigating the throws of the academy as a student from the global south meant that I would come out of this research with the experiential knowledge of knowing how institutional archives reproduce structures of exclusion and erasure. Thus, the work I am theorizing is informed by a particular type of intellectual rigor that can only be cultivated through experience.

Since this project is invested in Black feminist visual grammars, I found that I could not speak about Black visibility's affective power without a real engagement and consideration of Black music, especially if there would be a pathway towards utopian possibilities. Thus, I fashioned a proposition that could potentially move us towards what I deem as the audibility of Black visibility. I did this by examining the ways in which Dash and Maldoror mobilize the cinematic realm through the sonic frequencies found in jazz music. Whilst *Daughters of the Dust* has been extensively written about, I found that most studies failed to sufficiently engage the film through its sonic dimension. I also discovered that no current scholarship had even considered Dash and Maldoror to be contemporaries who were involved in an afro-diasporic call and response. As such, my observation was affirmed when I interviewed Julie Dash during a public screening of

her films, which I had coordinated with the UCLA Film and TV archives. During our conversation, Dash confirmed that Sarah Maldoror had been very influential and inspiring for her own cinematic practice.

In addition, I found that by tapping into the affective registers of music, film scholars could in fact access alternative routes and historiographies through which to engage cinematic texts. In the case of Black cinema, this project has been able to find that Black music genres such as jazz music, carry the potential of bearing aesthetics that are not only boundless but also liberatory in that they offer pathways into a visual grammar that escapes negation and colonial capture. Furthermore, through an investment in tracing Afro-diasporic continuities, this chapter was able to prove how the films of Dash and Maldoror enacted the political investments of Black Arts movements such as Third Cinema, the LA rebellion, and the Negritude Movement.

Whilst I have found the field of Black feminist studies to be incredibly generative in providing me with decolonial methods and frameworks for which to intervene Cinema and Media studies, a major weakness that I observed in the field is that it seldom traced any diasporic and transnational continuities. I observe this to be a symptom of how the myth of American exceptionalism is able to infiltrate even the very institutional spaces that we might erroneously deem as being self-reflexive.

Another finding that this project was able to generate is that Black women's activism remains scantily represented in cinemas across the African diaspora. Particularly, in the paradigm of South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement, historical accounts continue to center heteropatriarchal figures whilst simultaneously erasing the fundamental role played by Black women. Within this context my study found that the South African film industry continues to be a space of extreme exclusion for Black women filmmakers who remain under-resourced and

systematically omitted by a socioeconomic landscape that continues to serve the interests of white capital and the select few Black bourgeoisie. Thus, to attentively tend to Sithole's filmic work felt like an act of Black feminist excavation labor. Similarly to Maldoror who has an extensive body of work in spite of previous institutional neglect, Sithole continues to make important cultural work even though she still has so many projects that have not been able to come to life due to limited funding. Her approach to cinema comes from a deep commitment towards bearing witness to the lives of Black women and children.

To map the diasporic Black feminist continuities between South Africa's Anti-apartheid movement and the American Civil Rights Movement, in the process of researching Sithole, I discovered the film: *Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders: Women of the Civil Rights Movement* by independent women filmmakers, Joan Sadoff & Laura Lipson. Due to time constraints, I was not able to include this film in my project however, I propose that future scholarship that works within the terrain of Black women's film histories ought to consider a comparative study between the cinematic representations of Black women's activism in the films; *Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders: Women of the Civil Rights Movement* and *Standing on their Shoulders*. I would also like to call our attention to the similarities between the titles of both these films as this further marks what I observe as a diasporic call and response between South Africa and the Americas. Whilst I do not mean to overstate the diasporic and transnational continuities between South Africa and the United States, my belief and thinking is that when we fail to acknowledge these continuities, we fall prey to "the notion that we are in a new problem space"²⁷³ which in itself

²⁷³ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2008), 289.

problematically and conveniently suggests that we have moved —progressed as some would have it—beyond politics”²⁷⁴.

An important reflection in Sithole’s film is the way that heteropatriarchal accounts of Black liberation movements often dismiss women radicals such as Winnie Mandela as “the wife of Nelson Mandela”. Whilst Nelson remains to be a well-known global figure, Winnie’s political contributions have been both obscured and undermined. Seemingly there also appears to be limited scholarship on Winnie within the fields of cinema and media studies thus I propose that she be explored as a Black woman radical who enacts what Nicole Fleetwood has termed as a “troubling vision”²⁷⁵. As African feminist scholar Pumla Gqola has contended, Winnie is an interesting figure in that while she is constantly under the threat of being erased from history, in her lifetime she continued to perform a certain type of public militancy that constantly contested her erasure²⁷⁶.

As a final consideration in this project’s thematic concerns, I turn towards the self-portrait photography of South African art activist, Zanele Muholi. Muholi has an extensive body of work. During the course of my research, I discovered that they aim to produce at least one photograph a day, meaning that on average they produce 365 photographs in a year. It is in the year 2020, during the COVID-19 global crisis that Muholi’s practice stalled for the first time as they found it emotionally challenging to produce any work. Interestingly it is also around the same time that the volume of scholarship around their photography increased. Around this time, Muholi had already gained major international recognition. The type of attention that Muholi’s work had garnered is

²⁷⁴ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2008), 289.

²⁷⁵ Fleetwood, Nicole. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

²⁷⁶ *Standing on their Shoulders*, directed by Xoliswa Sithole (2018; Nayanaya Pictures, National Film & Video Foundation South Africa).

part of what sparked my interest. Initially, it was curious to me that Muholi was garnering a sense of overwhelming attention, particularly from the white western art-world. In a visual market that coopts and exploits Blackness, my type of trepidation was a form of healthy caution.

Thus, I initially came into the research of Muholi's work with the Fanonian conviction that assumes that ontological resistance is not possible in spaces created for and by whiteness. Therefore, I was keen to determine the type of possibilities of resistance that could be enacted by an artist whose identity fell into multiple categories of oppression. However, I quickly discovered that the very idea of thinking within the binaries of oppression and resistance was in fact reductive. As Simone Browne cautions that we ought to reconfigure the idea that racialized subjects can transform systems of subjugation simply by stepping into visibility²⁷⁷. Thus, I knew that I had to ask a different set of questions in order to fully grapple with the boundless nature of Muholi's visual grammar.

Muholi further served as an interesting case study particularly in contemplating the breadth of their visual archival practice and their community-based mobile gallery. This to me appeared to be a demonstration of the ease with which they are able to oscillate between documenting township queer life simultaneously with the exclusionary art-world. This was a question of how they were able to maintain an ethical relationship as an "insider" of the Black queer township world and also being a "sister/outsider"²⁷⁸ of the art-world. However, these are questions I was still not able to fully address, therefore I see this as a pathway for possible directions for future scholarship.

Sonyama Ngonyama is Muholi's self-portraiture series which garnered a lot of acclaim and criticism due to controversy of the visual histories it provoked. The self-portraiture series performs

²⁷⁷ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 69.

²⁷⁸ See Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Revised edition. Berkeley California: Crossing Press, 2007.

what I found to be a double function in that it claims the monstrosity of this history while simultaneously disarming its visual efficacy. The use of high contrasting to darken their skin in every single image resulted in some critics interpreting the work to be a form of performing minstrelsy. However, in the selected images that I examine in this project, I found that Muholi was able to denote beauty as an antidote and *otherwise* to a painful visual history.

Another feature of the otherwise that I found in Muholi's photography is that most of their titles were in their native language of isiZulu. Due to my own position as a Zulu native speaker, I have found myself drawn to the decolonial possibilities that are performed by language²⁷⁹. In fact, I found that when I contextualized Muholi's photography within indigenous Zulu cultural practices, this was able to generate far more nuanced and interesting possibilities for the creative strategies deployed in their work. Essentially, when I considered the function of language and Zulu culture in Muholi's work, I found that this complicated criticism that viewed their aesthetic strategies as being in congruent terms with anti-Black logics. For example, through a consideration of the series title: *Somnyama Ngonyama*, I found that the wording worked in concert with Zulu ontologies that in fact uphold ethical inter-relationality between the human and animal species. Thus, through this consideration, readings that interpreted Muholi's evocation to animality had to be further revised. Thus, I argued that unlike ecologies of anti-Blackness that purport to divide human from animal, "Hail the Dark Lioness" evokes a sense of pride and the associational link between lions and royalty. Thus, this complicates the idea that Muholi's aesthetic strategies be in congruent terms with anti-Black logics that associate animality with monstrosity. Instead, Muholi pushes us towards the ethical bind one must contend with as a viewer—as the interpretation of

²⁷⁹ See Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey. 1986.

their photographs seem to equally implicate the viewer in the fetishistic voyeurism perpetuated by technologies of capture.

Essentially, what I found to be most pressing for future scholarship on Muholi's work is a serious and rigorous engagement with the function and potentialities that are performed by the use of isiZulu language. Currently, what I have observed to be a weakness in the scholarship is how Western scholars often make an oversight in terms of adequately accounting for how Muholi's identity as a Zulu person could offer alternative readings of their visual grammar. Indeed, Muholi's photographic practice seems to offer endless possibilities of study for scholars working within the field of vision. As they continue to evidence histories of erasure and obscurification insofar as race, gender and sexuality is concerned, Muholi's photography and visual grammar seems to carry important stakes for scholars who work within all these intersections of study.

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