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Racial Tasting: On the Performance of Sugar and the Alchemy of Sweetness

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in Theater and Performance Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Sean Aaron Metzger, Chair

Paying close sensorial attention to what sugar performs in cultural productions (from the 20th, 21st century) and site-specific landscapes (in the Greater Caribbean), this dissertation questions how the taste *of* and *for* sugar is (re)produced by and (re)produces racializing acts of "sweet" consumption, i.e., acts of racial tasting. Drawing from theories surrounding the performance of materiality, phenomenology, Black Feminist and Caribbean studies, the study specifically addresses how those enslaved/indentured to make sugar taste sweet become the visual markers by which a racial hierarchy is grounded, naturalized, 'tasted,' and consumed. In this study, I propose that designations such as race are not only predetermined, sensed, or felt by the visual or auditory but that they are also experienced and habituated orally by tasting—an internalized haptic experience that manifests on the tongue and, as I argue, incorporates both the physiological/gustatory and the rhetorical/aesthetic. By questioning sugar's perceived 'sweetness,' I critically address how gustatory and aesthetic orientations have cultivated and naturalized the pleasurable consumption of racializing practices while also conceptualizing how unconsidered faculties of taste have the potential of broadening aesthetic perceptions.

The dissertation of Sarah Margarita Lewis-Cappellari is approved.

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ON RACIAL TASTING: AN INTRODUCTION

"Racial Tasting: On the Performance of Sugar and the Alchemy of Sweetness" delves into the material and symbolic resonance of sugar, refined from cane, to address how this "tastemaker" has fed and fueled the racial imagination. The dissertation argues that racial differentiation is intimately intertwined with historical practices of sugar's (re)production, refinement, and preservation—a material practice predicated on logics/sense-abilities, where blackness becomes the ground by which racial ideologies, technologies, and hierarchies are established, maintained, tasted, and pleasurably consumed. By paying close sensorial attention to what sugar performs in cultural productions (from the 20th, 21st century) and site-specific landscapes (in the Greater Caribbean), I consider how the aesthetic and gustatory taste of and for sugar are mutually constituted. I propose that race is not only a construct predetermined/exercised by 'looking at' or 'listening to' but that it is also experienced and habituated orally by tasting. As an internalized haptic experience that manifests in the body, taste(s), I argue, incorporate both the physiological/gustatory and the rhetorical/aesthetic.

When discussing race, performance is often used as a rubric of evaluation, exploring how identities are projected, negotiated, embraced, or resisted. This dissertation considers how the things we make and the things we taste, in part, make us by centering the role sugar plays in conditioning practices of subjectification (of matter that comes to matter) and objectification (of matter that comes to matter only when in the service of those who or that which matter(s)), while also exploring how sugar (an energy source and foodstuff) blurs those distinctions. I specifically address how sugar is the product of an anti-black imaginary by drawing attention to how representations of sugar are enabled by and enable a visually reductive practice of consumption I refer to as acts of racial tasting.

Drawing from theories surrounding the performance of materiality, phenomenology, Black Feminist and Caribbean studies, I address how the (re)production and consumption of

one of the first global commodities of the Caribbean has constituted racial meaning-making. By applying what I am calling a Black Caribbean materialist approach, I explore how sugar contributes to myths and dominant scripts that enable the agreeable/sweet consumption of raciality. I also examine how the (re)production and consumption of this "sweet" commodity perpetuates a "common sense" that deems certain human and more-than-human bodies easily consumable, exploitable, and disposable (Keeling 2007, Jackson 2016). Most importantly I take into account how this ingredient, a product of historically bitter material realities, has been a source of Black cultural production—an alchemical practice that gestures towards alternative sensorial orientations not reliant on 'sweet' subjugating sense-abilities.

To consider how the taste of/for sugar (re)produces myths of raciality for mass consumption, I focus on the artistic labor of contemporary Black/Latinx artists from the U.S. and the Caribbean who feature this ingredient in their work. Moving between performance studies analysis, historical contextualization, theoretical explorations, experimental analytic frameworks, cultural texts, and interviews this dissertation is generated by and elaborates on the following selected artworks: Kara Walker's temporary homage and sugar monument, *A Subtlety* (2014) that premiered at the former Domino Sugar refining factory in Brooklyn; Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's dollhouse series made of sugar in her first solo exhibit *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fow*l (2020), and a selection of works by the U.S. based Cuban born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, most centrally the installations *Sugar/ Bittersweet* (2010) and *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (2015). The selected art works on multiple registers illuminate, critique, and offer alternative sensorial orientations to the hegemonic visual sense-abilities of racial/gendered domination.

The artists and works featured in this study, while deploying aesthetic strategies that disrupt and unsettle the consumption of "normative" taste(s) foundational to the propagation and naturalization of racial tropes, have all found large-scale institutional support at varying

times in the past decade. The artists selected have garnered attention not just from prestigious spaces which feature the work of Black artists like the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, but also from well-funded, recognized public arts organization like Creative Times in New York and museums like the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts, which have enabled a larger reception and circulation of their work. Since the beginning of the early aughts politically driven artworks, on an international scale, have been recapitulated by art institutions, biennials, and top-bottom organizations (Argyropoulou 2015, Mouffe 2007). The institutional inclusion of historically marginalized communities and specifically of Black female artists in the U.S., in part, reflects a more general political turn in institutions historically known as arbiters of taste that have been marketing/promoting the ways in which they have expanded initiatives to "diversify" the artists they support, and the art works they've selected for public exhibition. However, as bell hooks in 1992 aptly noted amidst the popularity of diversity initiatives and multiculturalism, such acts of institutional inclusion can quickly become (de)politicized as such acts reiterate the neo liberal/capitalist logic of art market trends, i.e., what has temporarily been deemed "new," of the moment and, therefore, irresistibly desirable for immediate consumption. As hooks (1992) in her essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," writes,

> Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. (366)

Top-down trends to incorporate art and artists deemed "Other" within established cultural institutions can and should always be questioned, however, there is much to be said about bottom-up, decentralized, grass roots political initiatives conditioning institutional

aesthetic orientations. In the context and scope, for example, of movements like Black Lives Matter and its influence in public discourse and scholarship, the movement draws attention to the value of Black life that continues to be abjectly reduced to disposable, dead matter and that, therefore, not just on a national but on a global scale, has repeatedly not mattered. The works featured in this dissertation were exhibited during a period throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s when there has been renewed public attention, in large part thanks to movements like BLM, on overwhelming acts of anti-Black violence with artistic productions finding larger audiences at recognized institutions that reflect, critique, and contest continuing anti-Black sentiments.

While an art institutional critique and considerations on the (un)likelihood of the works featured in this study being subsumed by art market trends are not addressed in this study, the selected works are rather foregrounded for the ways they highlight the history of sugar's (re)production and consumption, and, more specifically, for the ways they offer a path towards understanding how sugar, as of the writing of this study, remains entangled in racial mattering. My research into the materiality of sugar was made possible by the artistic labor of cultural producers that feature the animating qualities of this particular 'dead matter' that offer valuable insights into what or who 'matters' in the process of sugars (re)production and consumption. Most urgently, the works draw attention to how this consumable commodity continues to target black(ened) bodies in specific and harmful ways. [1]

As one of the first ingredients of globalization, my research into the technologies/ideologies surrounding the sweetness of sugar offers insights into transnational conceptions of raciality. While my focus in this dissertation centers the materiality of sugar and what it performs in abetting or contesting racializing practices, Walker, Bermúdez-

[1] Throughout I use Zakiyyah Jackson's term "black(ened)" as a verb, a technique of social stratification where blackness becomes the ground by which that hierarchy is established (Jackson 2020).

Silverman, and Campos-Pons, respectively, touch upon national and transnational racial imaginaries—specifically how notions of race get naturalized along a "black" and "white" color continuum. There might not be a contemporary artist working today that is as equally popular and controversial as Kara Walker for the way she pleases, stirs, troubles, and agitates spectators while showcasing the affective power of Black cultural production specific to the United States. Some of her work's defining elements include her use of narrative imagery that augments and evokes racist as well as violently sexual content and are often accompanied by long titles like *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (The Drawing Center 1994). Much of her work has adapted this antebellum-signature style (a fiercely contested and contentious form of national aesthetic identity) while exhibiting how the national trauma and continued repercussions of racialized slavery—a still unatoned-for founding sin—haunts and instructs the ways that its history is consumed today. Walker's work offers a public stage for this historical reckoning.

After discovering that her great-grandfather harvested sugar cane in Puerto Rico, the multidisciplinary artist and Yale School of Art graduate, Sula Bermúdez-Silverman began to construct dollhouses made of sugar. Bermúdez-Silverman's work often engages questions surrounding societal structures and material histories foundational to the economic, racial, and gendered systems of power that have conditioned post-1492 tastes. The candied dollhouses she constructs, while signifying aspirational notions of "living the sweet life" in the U.S., also center a horror story/history of colonial labor practices in Haiti. The candied dollhouses, indicative of a model site for rehearsing modern-day aspirational ideals, provide an opportunity to question sweetened/whitened aesthetic orientations inherited from colonial architectures grounded and framed by racializing/deadening labor practices.

The career and work of the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons has spanned several decades and as many continents and encapsulates a Black Caribbean sense-ability. Several of Campos-Pons's works touch upon the harrowing ways that the transatlantic slave trade and Chinese indentured servitude made the cultivation and harvesting of sugar cane in the Caribbean possible. By highlighting the history of the people involved in sugar's production as well as Campos-Pons's ancestry—her Nigerian, Chinese, and Hispanic roots—the artist illustrates how these cultures converged over a single commodity. Campos-Pons's work sheds light on how racial differentiation became naturalized with the (re)production of sugar while also revealing the binary ways race is tasted in the U.S and the enduring tethering of sugar with black(ened) bodies.

Produced and consumed in the United States, the selected works both implicitly and explicitly incorporate other geographic destinations in the Caribbean that allude to the role Eurocentric colonialism and U.S. imperialism has played in drawing racial borders and solidifying/naturalizing racial categories. Set in the abandoned Domino Factory, Walker's homage took place at a site that, at one point, supplied much of the sugar consumed in the U.S. and imported at varying times of its operation unrefined sugar from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. This unrefined sugar was harvested seasonally by a predominately racially demarcated "black" labor force of either local or imported *braceros* (guest laborers) from Haiti and Jamaica; each with their particular racialized categories and specific imperial histories (Ortiz, 1947; Mintz, 1986; Brown, 2008; Danticat, 2014). Cuba, especially, was a central actor in nineteenth and twentieth century shifts in the global sugar economy when it became the world's largest exporter after the Haitian Revolution (Ferrer 2017).

Cuba's long and sordid history as a global sugar provider, and how the country became shackled to U.S. interests during the time the Domino factory was importing most of

its raw sugar from the island, yields fertile ground to delve into how racialized labor associated with sugar has been rendered in cultural productions. Here, I, like Campos-Pons, Bermúdez-Silverman, and Walker foreground some of the racial politics introduced by the cultivation and harvesting of sugarcane and its association with the Caribbean, highlighting as Sean Metzger, Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, and Michaeline A. Crichlow write in "Islands, Images, Imaginaries" (2014), the "interconnectivity" of these islands and their "overlapping relationships to coloniality and colonial projects" (335). The diverse populations on these islands—in large part a result of sugar's colonial history and the back-and-forth travel of selected workers from these islands to the U.S.—shed light on how dynamic and fluid understandings of identity become reified by satiating imperial/colonial tastes and desires.

Deeply indebted to Black feminist scholarship that has helped me to question how racialized notions of blackness get attached to bodies, goods, ideas, and aesthetic practices, I contribute to ongoing endeavors that call for a transformative theory and practice of humanity by examining our sensorial orientations towards matter(s) that have historically been divested of care. A foundational principle in Sylvia Wynter's (1992) writing on the aesthetic realm is that representations matter as they give us a sense of what matters. Against the grain of any predetermined trajectory, set of values, or criteria deemed universal, Wynter centers how aesthetic sensibilities arise under specific political, social, cultural, and historical contexts/constraints. The autonomy of the art object, as Wynter articulates does not exist. By proposing to engage the aesthetic realm through a practice, she coins, of decipherment, rather than a conventional Western act of critique, she questions the ways in which aesthetics/sense-abilities are influenced/shaped by hegemonic forces that produce/structure "culture-specific" normative ways of being/knowing/feeling. As Wynter writes:

> A deciphering practice proposes, therefore, that the *ways* in which each culture-specific *normal* subject *knows* and *feels about* its social reality (…) should in no instance be taken as any *index* of what the empirical reality of our social universe *is*. Rather these *normal* ways of knowing and feeling (together with the signifying practices which induce these "normal ways") should be taken and as the index of *how* each such world must normally be known and felt about, as the indispensable condition of each such world being brought into existence by the collective behaviors which all such culture-specific normal ways of knowing and feeling about the world, including our own, rule-governedly orient and regulate. (271, author's emphasis)

Thinking with Sylvia Wynter's theorizations I attempt not only to interrogate the proliferation of racializing hegemonic sense-abilities but also examine "the rules that govern these representations and why?" (Proud Flesh interview 2006, 17). Representations of sugar in the artworks featured help me to consider how the ideologies/technologies deployed in the (re)production and consumption of sugar have been integral in the standardization and naturalization of racial capitalism (Robinson 2005, Williams 1994).

The selected artworks also provide me with an opportunity to consider how sugar has animated Black cultural production. Taking into account Huey Copeland's call in his article "Tending-toward- Blackness" (2016), to sense "what might be possible if… we tended toward blackness—in all of its sensuous and imperceptible unfolding—that phantom site whose traces everywhere mark the construction of the material world and provide a different horizon from which to take our bearings" (12), in this study I center the materiality of sugar in that attempt. By centering de-valued black(ened) matters, the selected art works gesture towards the cultivation of unconsidered/under-recognized taste(s) that provide "a different horizon from which to take our bearings."

Contributing to the field of performance studies I consider not only how embodied practices of tasting are implicated in the construction of race but also how the animating qualities of materiality affect the constructedness of how and what materializes as valuable and preservable verses worthless and disposable. As a performance studies scholar, I take my cue from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who, in her 1999 article "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium" conceptualizes how food and performance converge at three different junctures. She lucidly explores how food production and consumption incorporates acts of *doing* (the preparation, making, serving), *behaving* (habits, customs, rituals) and *showing* (when making and behaving are put on display) (2). While food in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article is conceptualized as a human-animated medium, this dissertation interrogates what sugar performs, what it 'carries out' by examining it as an energizing force. In this study I'm, therefore, thinking about what sugar does as an energy source, as a sweet ingredient, as a type of tall perennial grass, and what it does on and in bodies that are in its proximity. I also consider how sugar affects behavior both in its consumption and production and the type of cultural practices/exchanges it then animates. And I attend to what sugar symbolizes and represents and what those representations perform. I, therefore, excavate the relational practices/gestures fueled by how sugar has been made and how that impacts behavior—how it is tasted/experienced—that in turn is affected by and affects the way making and tasting sugar are displayed.

NOTES ON SUGAR

Table sugar or granulated sugar, also known as sucrose, is both a foodstuff and energy source that can be found in almost every kitchen pantry today. The processes and practices of extracting sugar from sugar cane for mass consumption have been a catalyst of an interconnected and ever-evolving history of imperialism, colonialism, racial capitalism, and of Black cultural production. Sugar—historically produced through racializing

exploitative labor practices like slavery, indentured servitude, convict leasing and penal labor—has come to fuel the body, the brain and in more recent history the transportation sector, while also contributing to body-altering trends like obesity and diabetes, conditions that have disproportionally targeted bodies overworked in its production.[2] Satisfying the world's sweet tooth continues to link practices of labor exploitation, racial hegemonies, international economic policies, environmental catastrophes, dependency, pleasure, fun, and risk.[3] The cultural, economic, ecological, socio-political, and bodily transformations wrought by the production and consumption of sugar and its significance in fueling, altering, and breaking human and non-human bodies throughout half a millennium, make this consumable commodity an important "actant" to consider in the development, maintenance, and reproduction of racially motivated ideologies, technologies, and socio-cultural practices and relations.

I refer to the term actant not only as it was first conceptualized by French theorist Bruno Latour (2008), but also in the way that it has been taken up by eco-feminists such as Donna Haraway, new materialist philosophers like Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, and queer of color theorists like Mel Y. Chen. These scholars posit the urgency of resisting anthropocentricism, de-stabilizing existing hierarchies of life/matter, human/animal, organic/inorganic, by considering the agential qualities of matter to foster a politics of ecological sustainability. Bennett succinctly defines an actant as "a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events." She further explains that its "competence is deduced from its performance rather than posited in advance

[2] See Lauren Berlant's "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)" (2007) and Anthony Ryan Hatch et al. "Sugar Ecologies: Their Metabolic and Racial Effects" (2019)
[3] For a detailed history on the ramifications of sugar production and consumption in the West see Eric Williams *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944); Fernando Ortiz *Cuban Counterpoint* (1947); Sidney Mintz *Sweetness and Power* (1986)

of the action" (2010, viii). In other words, an actant is defined by what it does and what it, in turn, animates or enables. The Black Caribbean materialist analysis I apply throughout this dissertation, brings into focus the materiality of sugar to critically address the ways this particular actant has enabled/animated/conditioned sense-abilities that inform how and what matter(s) continue to have/extract value/worth today.

Two foundational studies that offer a material history of cane sugar that I draw and depart from include Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) and Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986). *Cuban Counterpoint* applies a poetic historical methodology to compare sugar with Cuban tobacco. Drawing from Ortiz's poetic methodology in the first section of *Cuban Counterpoint* provides a frame of analysis to think about tobacco and sugar as "actants" that encapsulate a history of social relations. Ortiz personifies tobacco as masculine and native born; tobacco is representative of Cuba's economic sovereignty. Sugar is personified as feminine, foreign born, and black and is indicative of Cuba's willingness to be exploited by foreign economic interests. Throughout the text the raced and gendered connotations of sugar, *Doña Azúcar*, and the socio-economic problems reaped by her (re)production are attributed to a black(ened) labor force historically exploited in sugar's production. While deeply influenced by Ortiz's historical poetic approach, this study critically addresses the anthropomorphization of sugar and the ways in which sugar becomes raced and gendered. Reading against the grain of Ortiz's material history provides an opportunity to explore how anti-black sense-abilities become naturalized/reified in relation to sugar. Thinking with and through critical materialist scholarship that resists the notion that objects are passive, this dissertation also pushes against the "passivity" and revictimization of those objectified who have worked under unlivable and untenable conditions tending sugar cane.

Tying some of the visceral and sensory aspects of taste to the social and economic structures that make consumption possible, Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986), delves into how Europeans and Americans transformed sugar from a rare foreign luxury to a common necessity of modern life. In the process, Mintz addresses the power dynamics between those who controlled the means of production and the burgeoning working class who came to consume sugar on a massive scale—examining how the relationship between production and consumption paralleled the relationship between its use and its meaning. For Mintz, the introduction of sugar into daily diets has a distinctive history that altered not only meal practices but also notions of time, gender, and class as well as shifts in what he calls the "locus of desire" (79). As Mintz writes, "the first sweetened cup of tea to be drunk by an English worker was a significant historical event, because it prefigured the transformation of an entire society, a total remaking of its economic and social basis" (214). According to Mintz's analysis, the addictive taste of sugar made it difficult to give up and thus a contentious item of anti-slavery boycott. While Mintz dedicates an entire chapter to the ways that sugar was produced and ubiquitously available because of racialized slave labor, he does not center nor theorize sugar's role in racial meaning-making. As Mintz ingeniously exhibits the relationship between sugar's use and meaning—detailing how it has fueled capitalist time and marked gender and class distinctions—this study also considers the relational practices of making and tasting that have impacted and energized practices of racialization.

THE PERFORMANCE OF MATERIALITY

Although difficult to concisely, or comprehensively define, as there are several branches of philosophy that contribute to "new" materialist thought (including the Foucault inspired post-structuralist, anti-humanist foundations of posthumanism, the Heidegger-influenced object-oriented ontologies (OOO), and the Spinozian-animated theory of

assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari), the term was first coined by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti in the second half of the 1990's (Dolphijn & Tuin,48). The field, broadly speaking is also highly influenced by Donna Haraway's "cyborgian" feminist dismantling of the binary of nature and culture; her "naturecultures," Bruno Latour's contributions to Actor-Network-Theory, Jane Bennet's vibrant/vital matter, and Karen Barad's agential realism, to name a few of the scholars that are frequently referenced. New materialism takes seriously that all matter is agential, and that agency—drawing upon Barad's notion of 'intra-action'—is not something that any material entity inherently has but is rather distributed among materials in relation (2007). These scholars do not deny the importance of human subjects (except perhaps some virulent strains of ooo) but rather unsettle conventional Western philosophical hierarchies that have established boundaries between human and nonhuman, matter and discourse, interrogating practices through which these boundaries have been constituted, stabilized, and destabilized.

The "newness" of new materialism, has, however, heralded several critiques as the descriptor tends to obscure the fact that for centuries the vitality of materiality has been central to several onto-epistemologies and cosmologies. For example, the vitalist beliefs at the heart of the practice of medieval alchemy, Spinoza's univocity of substance which animates much of the discourse in this theoretical field, indigenous cosmologies of animism, the work of feminist and performance studies scholars who have theorized corporeality and the materiality of the body, and as several critical race theorists have noted ways of being that have never been considered human in the first place. Zakiyyah Jackson in "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement "Beyond the Human" (2015), aptly critiques new materialism's overture of moving "beyond" the human as these fields of thought do not consider positions constituted by Blackness in Western philosophies of being. As Jackson writes "Contra the beguiling appeal of the "beyond," I would ask: What and crucially whose

conception of humanity are we moving beyond? Moreover, what is entailed in the very notion of a beyond? Calls to become "post" or move "beyond the human" too often presume that the originary locus of this call, its imprimatur, its appeal, requires no further examination or justification but mere execution of its rapidly routinizing imperative" (215). In her critique, Jackson is specifically referencing Sylvia Wynter's (2003) interrogations into the concept of "Man" as the category "overly determined" by an *ethno* Western European onto-epistemology of the human created by "Man" and then deemed universal. Jackson relays how new materialism needs to look at Black being as an onto-epistemological site, rather than evoking the new, which once again marginalizes already marginalized, unconsidered, and devalued ways of being/feeling/knowing.

Much of Alexander Weheliye's rigorous scholarship in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), attends to these elisions in scholarship by centering the work of Wynter, and Hortense Spillers. Spillers, for example looks at the pathologized excesses attributed to the black female figure as a site with potentially liberating dimension of escaping Western liberal notions of the human (Spillers, 1987). Weheliye elaborates on Wynter's large-scale intellectual project "that disentangles Man from the human in order to use the space of subjects placed beyond the grasp of this domain as a vital point from which to invent hitherto unavailable genres of the human" (27). Huey Copeland, in his own reflections in "Tending-toward-Blackness," questions the ways in which new materialism has been used in the academy especially "in interrogations of art and aesthetics that risks "the social reproduction of white supremacy" if it does not consider epistemologies… stemming from black cultural traditions" (141). For example, some scholars that interrogate the ontology of objecthood include Copeland, and his own project in *Bound to Appear* (2013), that looks at the shared genealogy of black bodies and objects, i.e., those marked as black and therefore considered "things"; or Fred Moten's *In the Break*

(2003) that takes Marx's speculative inquiry "If commodities could speak," and replies that "they do and can resist"; or Uri McMillian, who in *Embodied Avatars* (2015), considers how Black women artists have manipulated the dimensions of objecthood, to name a few.

Part of these critiques arrive, as Sara Ahmed contends because of what she calls some of the founding gestures of this field (2008). Take, for example, the following lines from the introduction of the anthology *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010): "Material dimensions have recently been marginalized by fashionable constructivist approaches and identity politics. Of course, the latter have a good deal to say about the body and its imbrication in relationships of power, but we are not convinced that they pay sufficient attention to the material efficacy of bodies or have the theoretical resources to do so" (19). Copeland bitingly writes, "As easily as that, knowledges aimed precisely at holistic understandings of material being-together and being-in-the-world are collapsed, caricatured, and dismissed with nary a footnote and more than a whiff of an age-old logic that would limit the thinking of the other to the impositions on her body, without, of course, reflecting upon the white liberal biases that inform such a statement or the volume's stated interests in ontologies, biopolitics, and political economy" (142). In her contribution to the anthology, Sara Ahmed resists such dismissive and universalizing claims, situating her contributions as a "renewed" materialism indebted to feminist scholarship produced during the "cultural turn" (234).

Alyson Cole, in "The subject of objects: Marx, new materialism, & queer forms of life," argues that blurring the subject/object dyad and "endowing" objects with agency is actually a constitutive feature of capitalism. Cole points out how some of the language and concepts deployed, for example, in the case of Bennet, create their own sets of binaries and contradictions with its heteronormative, gendered distinction between vitality/passivity, and the humanistic valence of agency that *humans* ascribe to materials (10). As these critical race,

feminist, socialist, queer and gender studies scholars show, new materialism's emphasis on all matter mattering, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2016) has noted "can ironically reinforce assumptions about a universal human subject and elide considerations of gender, race, and power." This universalizing tendency erases the actuality that there are varying ways that matter comes to matter, or how some matter is even considered in the matter. Such critiques implore us to think about the very real distinctions of what and how knowledge production surrounding materiality, and therefore of materiality itself, is acknowledged, valued, and or cared for.

Such considerations are rigorously addressed in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, by Mel Y. Chen who looks at how "inanimate assumptions" in the social imaginary illuminate understandings of how animacy itself is immersed in hierarchal politics infused by race, sexuality, and ability. Chen interrogates an ordering of the world based on what is considered more or less animate presenting an expansive notion of "animacy" that refers to the field of relationships in which entities (from humans to monkeys, metal particles, and language) encounter power structures that mediate between life and death. Proposing that the sorting of bodies as more or less "alive" forms the basic "stuff" or matter of politics, Chen asserts that animacy is profoundly implicated in questions of power and recognition (9). In other words, Chen uncovers how animacy or "liveness" is intimately connected to the right to life. Drawing heavily from Chen's concept of 'racial mattering,' in this dissertation I often question and address the ways that sugar has enlivened bio-necro-political dimensions—of matter that comes to matter at the expense of/ by deadening other matter(s).

Performance studies scholarship that looks at questions surrounding "liveness," embodiment, (re)presentation, and performativity also finds fruitful encounters, intersections, linkages to new materialist theory. For, example Robin Bernstein (before new materialism

became a scholarly trend) brings the study of race, performance, and materiality together by interrogating the capacity of "things" to script behavior in "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race" (2009). Describing how there are elements of material culture that "script" racializing gestures, she also notes that although behavior might be influenced and scripted by "things," people do not lack agency, a more general critique that Rebecca Schneider briefly touches upon in the *TDR* issue on "New Materialism and Performance Studies," writing that by granting matter agency "doing so might exonerate humans of responsibility" (10). Bernstein rather states "that agency, intention and racial subjectification, co-emerge through everyday physical encounters with the material world," referring to the notion of a script not as a rigid set of actions but rather as a blueprint that is open to "resistance, interpretation, and improvisation" (68,69).

As Amelia Jones proposes in "Material Traces Performativity, Artistic 'Work,' and New Concepts of Agency," some of the key insights that new materialist theory offers are not only "the animated and animating potential of materialities" but also the acknowledgment of the performativity of these materialities. Here Jones looks toward Karen Barad, who not only acknowledges matter as discursive but also as agential, critiquing the prioritization of "language" as the primary source of meaning-making (Barad,2003). Barad writes: "Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn; it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing' is turned into language or some other form of cultural representation . . . There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter" (801). For Barad, signification is only one aspect of many that give a substance both meaning and capacity.

Barad is probably one of the most influential thinkers in the field of feminist materialism other than Donna Haraway, whose work, despite the unfortunate gesture of throwing linguistic models under the bus above, I find generative for my own inquiries into

the performance (what matter does) and performativity (of how that doing comes to matter) of sugar. Barad (2003) in her provocation, wants to clarify that performativity is contingent on discursive practices that are *not only*, or not necessarily linguistic, i.e., she is trying to avoid a representationalist model of discursivity. Performativity, for Barad, is understood as a question not of what language enacts, but what matter enacts. As Barad explains, "matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency,' (822). She explicates how her agential realist theory is deeply influenced by "technoscientific and other practices that takes feminist, antiracist, poststructuralist, queer, Marxist, science studies, and scientific insights seriously, building specifically on important insights from Niels Bohr, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Vicki Kirby, Joseph Rouse, and others" (810, 811). Her "agential realist" proposition is summed up in this paragraph:

> On an agential realist account, *discursive practices are specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted. That is, discursive practices are ongoing agential intra-actions of the world through which local determinacy is enacted within the phenomena produced. Discursive practices are causal intra-actions*— they enact local causal structures through which one "component" (the "effect") of the phenomenon is marked by another "component" (the "cause") in their differential articulation. Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility. In its causal intra activity, "part" of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another "part" of the world. Discursive practices are boundary-making practices that have no finality in the ongoing dynamics of agential intra-activity. (2003, 828, Barad's emphasis)

This dense/rigorous understanding of the performativity of matter is most directly influenced by what she calls the "onto-epistemology" of quantum physicist Niels Bohr and the findings on experiments of subatomic particles. When experiments began to be made in this area, physicists were confounded as they could not figure out how subatomic particles (which in Newtonian or classical physics are things in themselves) sometimes acted like waves, and sometimes acted like particles. What Bohr, ultimately, can prove is how this finding undoes the distinction between the observer and observed, as apparatuses (understood as concept and tools of measurement) don't only determine what we know but also what can be said to *be.* Separate entities "things" don't exist. Therefore, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. This relational ontology is at the heart of Barad's project.

What are the conditions of possibility, or the state of being for considering/experiencing/perceiving agency as relational? How are we able to attune ourselves to such proposals? As Dana Luciano (2015) discusses, "The most compelling contribution of the new materialisms is not conceptual or analytic, strictly speaking, but sensory. The attempt to attend to the force of liveliness of matter will entail not just a reawakening or redirection of critical attention, but a reorganizing of the senses, departing from the limitations of the Aristotelian model…In re/awakening criticism to alternate sensory dimensions, it holds the potential to expand and enliven—though crucially, not to replace—'old' (historical) materialisms" (Quoted in Roudeau, 2015). And as Manuel DeLanda discusses subjecthood and politics, "I agree that a theory of the subject is absolutely necessary, but it must be based on Hume, not on Kant: subjective experience not as organized conceptually by categories but as literally composed of intensities (of color, sound, aroma, flavor, texture) that are given structure by habitual action (Dolphijn & Tuin 46).

The contributions and scholarly debates surrounding the study of materiality reviewed above, have been instrumental in the ways I have been developing, adapting, and applying a Black Caribbean materialist approach to the study of what sugar performs. This approach is in continuous dialogue with "old," "new," and "renewed" critical materialism(s) while also bringing to the fore an often under-recognized/acknowledged site of knowledge production foundational to our understandings of how taste(s) have been cultivated in the West post 1492. As I attune myself to the material and symbolic resonance of sugar, I attempt in this dissertation to center the performativity of race as it relates to the performance of materiality. To broaden sense-abilities to the agential force of materiality, I delve into the ways the sense of taste is conditioned by how sugar is encountered/perceived.

THE SENSE(S) OF TASTE(S)

To assist me in exploring perceptions of taste, I look to phenomenology that in its most basic sense is the philosophical study of embodied subjective experiences and consciousness, but also a methodology for deconstructing and analyzing such sensory experiences. Founded in the work of the philosopher Edmund Husserl, together with substantial contributions from others, such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida (to name a few) it is derived from the Greek *phainómenon*, which means 'that which appears' (OED). Phenomenology is applied to elucidate the importance of using methods that accesses people's experience of the world, as meaning is derived from sensory perception. As Merleau-Ponty claimed in *Phenomenology of Perception* "To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, our body is not in space, it is of it." (2005, 171). Consciousness comes into being through bodily relation with the world—a concept that in many ways parallels the relational ontology proposed in theories of materiality (Barad, 2003). Phenomenology asserts

that what or how we perceive is inseparable from the way we inhabit and orient ourselves towards the world.

The phenomenological approach applied in this dissertation is in part inspired by and departs from Sara Ahmed's adaptation in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006). The book begins with this central question "What difference does it make 'what' we are oriented towards?" Of particular interest is how Ahmed orients her reader towards backgrounds. Paying careful attention to what is "put aside" to attend to the work of phenomenology, she offers insights into how the field of phenomenology itself has been oriented. Ahmed goes about this by interrogating the way Husserl attends to his writing table as he applies his "bracketing" technique. Phenomenology begins its description with an experience as it seems directly given in what is called the "natural attitude." Husserl's "bracketing" is a way of destabilizing the "natural attitude," a critique of empiricism that did not consider or interrogate the perceptual experience of objects. "Bracketing" is a way of apprehending objects "as if" unfamiliar, a way of arriving to an object as the "thing in itself," to get to the essence of things so that we can attend to the flow of perception. Yet this de-familiarization is dependent on "putting aside" the familiar.

Using Marxists and feminist theory, Ahmed intervenes in Husserl's methodology complicating the possibility of arriving at the "thing in itself" as it erases the conditions of possibility for the object's arrival. Ahmed asks what it would mean to orient ourselves not to "the thing in itself" but to that which must take place in order for something to appear. If phenomenology turns us towards things in terms of how they reveal themselves "then we might also have to follow those things around," a proposal she calls a type of ethno-phenomenology (39). Therefore, for phenomenology to attend backgrounds it might do so by interrogating the conditions of an object's emergence. Though Ahmed is speaking in Marxist terms to shed light on the gendered domestic labor that has been set aside or unconsidered for

an object to emerge, I interrogate the relational practices between human and non-human actants that create the conditions for an object to emerge. This strategy allows me to look for example at the conceptualization, production, and emergence of Walker's *Subtley*, and how it came to appear in the fashion and manner it did on the floor of the old Domino Factory. While Ahmed questions spatial and temporal orientations, I explore gustatory and aesthetic orientations.

Taste, according to the OED, is defined as the "faculty or sense by which that particular quality of a thing is discerned, the organs of which are situated chiefly in the mouth." Yet, gustatory taste according to philosopher Barry C. Smith in his article "The Nature of Sensory Experience: The Case of Taste and Tasting" (2013), is a sensory experience that is virtually impossible to isolate. Smith is interested in interrogating what aspects of our experience are put aside or ignored in how things appear to us, questioning how reliable those structures of experience might be. "We think of the experiences we are having as either visual, or auditory or tactile, not realizing that they often arise from the fusion of different sensory inputs" (292). How we experience taste is one such case. He goes on to elaborate that what we call 'taste' is, in its most basic form, the result of a multisensory integration of touch, taste, and smell that together create a 'flavour' experience.

Unified 'flavour' experiences, Smith elaborates, provide a challenge when trying to reconcile the underlying processing story with the conscious experience of subjects as access to experiences are simultaneously bombarded by several senses. "We recognize distinct aspects of conscious experience, such as seeing or hearing, etc., but we are not aware of how interactive the senses are; not aware, that is, of cross-modal interactions where activity in one sense has an impact on another, nor of multisensory integration, where information from different sensory channels merge" (301). Different senses, therefore, can have an impact on how I perceive what I am tasting, and what I'm tasting can have an impact on what I perceive.

Essentially all sensory perception entails a type of synesthesia or a translation of the senses that are immersed in lived and embodied experiences. Smith concludes by stating, “The case of flavour experiences presents a challenge to any philosophical theory that supposes we have immediate and authoritative knowledge of the nature and character of our own sensory experiences, or that our senses simply inform us about the character of our experience” (310). He clarifies that the importance of this issue goes far beyond flavour perception “since many results from cognitive neuroscience are showing us that multimodal perceptions are the rule, not the exception” (301).

As the food anthropologist David E. Sutton writes in his article “Food and the Senses” (2010), synesthesia has been explored as key to food memories, as memory possesses multiple interacting sensory registers (217). Delving into this point Sutton quotes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s article about food as a performance medium: “From color, steam rising, gloss and texture, we infer taste, smell, and feel….Taste is something we anticipate and infer from how things look, feel to the hand, smell (outside the mouth), and sound….Our eyes let us ‘taste’ food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell” (3). Gustatory experiences (what Sutton coins as ‘gustemologies’ riffing on Steven Feld’s ‘acoustemology,’ in the way that food is central to cosmologies and world views) entails insights into the sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of specific subjects.

Sutton refers to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979), one of the first to explore food as a source of social distinction, writing about how aesthetic, and gustatory taste intermingle. Sutton, however, argues that “his analysis takes a wrong turn for our purposes in subsuming gustatory taste under the wider category of aesthetic taste as part of his theory of cultural capital” (211). Sutton goes on to elaborate that it is only occasionally that tastes, as explored by Bourdieu, become “the faculty of perceiving flavours” (213). Taste becomes the capacity to distinguish and name or categorize flavors (and to make other

aesthetic judgments). Rather than delving into the actual multisensory experience, taste is, according to Sutton, already overly determined by Bourdieu's class-based structural analysis. Yet how this distinguishing capacity is conditioned and communicated also affects and conditions perceptions of flavors, like sweetness. Vivian Sobchack (2010) argues that however direct an experience might seem they are not only mediated by our own lived bodies, but that our lived bodies as well as our experiences of them are always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things, what she calls "the historical and cultural systems that constrain," but that also maintain, (re)produce, and change "the inner limits of our perception and the outer limits of our world" (4). A sugar-related gustatory experience might bring about abstract concepts and thoughts, images or memories, or bodily feelings that guide moods, emotions, and affects as well as aesthetic judgments.

Arnold Berleant in "The Sensuous and the Sensual in Aesthetics" (1964) writes, that "every perception is potentially aesthetic" (186). Yet the bodily sense of taste, in Western philosophical traditions, has historically occupied a lowly position within the hierarchy of the human senses. Berleant delves into the influence of Greek philosophy that looked to sight and hearing as the senses most closely tied to reason, and therefore of most importance in the judgement and discernment of taste. Sight and hearing require distance, while the other senses smell, touch, taste call attention to the body, disrupting the possibility of the supposed distance required to judge works of beauty/art. According to this logic smell, touch, and taste, therefore, are relegated to the bodily sensual and excluded from any role in aesthetic perception. The hierarchization and hence segregation of the senses, to this day in the West, have limited our capacity to make and taste works of art that are not perceived as aural or visual, yet our capacity to sense phenomena, as outlined by Smith, is already multimodal. There is then a way that sensory faculties such as gustatory taste are negated, a negation that, as Berleant writes, is "in every sense, anesthetic. Moreover, we shall show that such a

discrimination has a distorting influence on aesthetic theory in general, eliminating a large area of experience from the possibility of aesthetic perception of which it is intrinsically capable" (186). In other words, the philosophical branch of aesthetics in the West has, in several ways, initiated practices for numbing, disregarding, and devaluing certain senses associated with the bodily.

A definition of taste that best elucidates its meaning within aesthetic philosophies inherited from the Greeks is "the sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, or beautiful; esp. discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; spec. the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in art, literature, and the like." "Taste" may also refer merely to the preferences of individuals; taste in this sense is "the fact or condition of liking or preferring something; inclination, liking for; appreciation" (OED). These descriptions align with theories that during the Enlightenment defined taste as a feeling. As Carolyn Korsmeyer in "Taste as Sense and as Sensibility" (1997) asserts "taste for something just is the subjective pleasure that one takes in it" (209). Furthermore, Korsmeyer elaborates, gustatory taste became an important metaphor for developing theories of taste in the eighteenth-century as the two taste(s) shared so many similarities. For example, taste is a sense that responds to qualities immediately perceived, both are capable of discernment, i.e., judgements of taste or distaste, both aesthetic and food objects are relished and savored, both are bound up with pleasure and pain reactions, also standards of gustatory/aesthetic taste can be cultivated. As Korsmeyer elaborates the "immediacy of the aesthetic phenomenon of savoring and enjoying experienced qualities" (212), is exactly what made the metaphor problematic for philosophers of taste. The emphasis on immediacy and detachment, outlined above in the classical hierarchical classifications of the senses, associate gustatory taste with immediacy and the ability to feel, while vision and sight with the ability to reflect and detach. The subjectivity of taste, the quality that allows taste to be comparable to the subjectivity inherent in aesthetic

judgements, is the same quality that ends up causing problems for European aesthetic theories refined in the eighteenth-century out of fear of relativism that would cloud universalist models developed/deployed/ projected at the time.

Korsmeyer unpacks David Hume's and Emmanuel Kant's understandings and use of the metaphor. Hume embraces similarities between taste(s), while Kant wants to draw distinctions while still adopting literal taste as a metaphor for aesthetic sensibility. Hume, embraces the subjectivity of both claiming: “To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless of an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or the real bitter” (210). He argues that as humans we are so alike that we are inclined to enjoy the same qualities in objects. However, standards of taste are distinguished by those cultivated pleasures experienced by the critic who has acquired the ability to discern what determines good taste. Essentially, he argues for the “delicacy of taste” which requires organs of perception “so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition” (210, 211). No separation between the two tastes required.

Kant, though cognizant of the subjective response and centrality of pleasure to evaluation and judgement also ties both tastes together, but gustatory taste remains a metaphor. Gustatory taste, he claims is “agreeable,” you either like something or you don't, everyone has their own taste, but the *disinterested* viewer is the one who can assess standards of “beauty,” i.e., engage in aesthetic judgement. Kant's solution to the subjectivity of taste is to require a sharp distinction from literal taste sensations and the experience of beauty. For Kant aesthetic judgement is based on a *disinterested* pleasure, i.e., pleasure free from practical desires, including hunger and thirst, that “can transcend individual whim and lay claim to universal agreement” (215). Another aspect that is important for Kant’s separation of taste is the need to distinguish the form of an artwork which occurs with sight and hearing but is difficult with taste and smells as they tend to blend and lose their distinction. Literal taste is

too unclear as it draws attention to one's own body and therefore, too subjective for making universal claims. Korsmeyer elucidates taste is historically understood to be of but not in the body. That is, taste is considered to originate in the body without being part of it: initially grounded in the gustatory and olfactory senses, it has been imagined to transcend the intimacy of bodily experience to be realized in the non-corporeal realm of intellect. The material, for Kant, would remain just a metaphor for the immaterial.

Korsmeyer elaborates that this way of thinking remains popular in contemporary philosophy, as notions of taste as causal (i.e., biological factors that influence how we taste therefore are caused by something) vs. criterial distinctions (have reasons, i.e., the ability to be examined and debated to obtain a level of objectivity) remain. Criteria, (what Zakiyyah Jackson would call “the enabling myths of a Western onto-epistemology" that I soon explore) supposedly are not bound by the pleasure responses. The aesthetic judgement is a criterial judgment based on *reasons* one responds in one way or another, not the search of the *causes* of one’s response. This again assumes that the bodily senses are more subjective than the intellectual senses, and that literal taste is just a reflection of one's own response as it does not transcend the bodily. Yet, as Korsmeyer concludes,

> The chief reason taste was selected as a metaphor for aesthetic sensibility in the first place is that criteria alone *never* yield an aesthetic judgment. If they did, then one could reduce art criticism to a series of applications of principles of particular works… if the works were judged independently of our experience of them, if they were devoid of the sentiment “aroused” then we would not have the problem of aesthetic judgment the metaphor of taste sought to clarify.” (223)

The art works highlighted in this study all orient the beholder to the multivalent ways the taste of/for sugar blurs the distinction between the mind body dyad foundational to Western philosophical traditions. For example, during the reception of Walker’s exhibit and

homage to those enslaved in its production at the Domino Factory I question the ways several members of the public simulated the gustatory tasting of the sugar-coated *Subtlety*—acts that took place in a public arena that brought to the fore the entanglement of gustatory and aesthetic orientations. The selected works in this study rather center the materiality of sugar to reveal how the gustatory and the aesthetic are mutually constituted through *bodily* senses that dismantle the disembodied myth of transcendence— a philosophical ideal that, as I later unpack through the work of Jackson (2016), is itself a racialized notion.

Perceptions, criteria, and distinctions of taste can tell us a lot about racial sense-abilities. A central question, for example, in Simon Gikandi's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011), is how slavery and blackness shape ideas and ideals of taste. Gikandi looks at the era in which aesthetic theories were being developed by philosophers like Kant and Hume, to interrogate how notions of taste and beauty were constructed around notions of Afro-alterity. Specifically, he looks at the eighteenth-century development of cultures of taste and the growth of British North American and West Indian slavery before abolition, to explore how the sensibility associated with the Enlightenment was intimately associated with racialized slavery (xiii). As a product of the Enlightenment, the culture of taste emphasized that experience had to be processed through "higher" sensibilities such as reason, yet these sensibilities were deemed higher status and attributed *only* to the white patriarchal culture in Western Europe that was developing, deploying, and imposing such theories as universal. Here alterity takes on a structural function that enables Europe to assume the position of rational/cultural superiority. Therefore, the mass of African slaves who drove the European economies of the time were excluded from the domain of modern reason, morality, and aesthetic judgment, their enslavement subsequently, not considered in bad taste. As Gikondi quotes Kant in his complementary use of Hume as a source in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*:

> The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that arises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through special gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. (5)

Ultimately the culture of taste had a regulatory function in society, it defined and conditioned good taste and etiquette, determined social standards, and functioned to reconcile commerce and taste. While Gikondi relates how *disinterested* taste is being cultivated as products emblematic of the bounty of imperial expansion and colonialism are being consumed (i.e., sugar, rum, coffee) in the popular coffee houses frequented by such intellectuals, he does not theorize the ways that gustatory tastes were also feeding and fueling such ideas and ideals. The gustatory taste associated with goods cultivated by enslaved Africans takes a lowly philosophical position while sugar at the time, was becoming a global tastemaker.

In “Sense of Things” (2013), Zakiyyah Jackson critiques the imperial Western humanism that cultivated the onto-epistemology (described above) that “initiated a globally expansive re-ordering of aesthesis and imaginative capacities” (3). According to Jackson “Culture, in the new episteme, now took the place that Reason had played in the Classical episteme, as the index for determining the degree to which a particular group knew 'Self/World' in the metaphysical terms of the current order's 'rational' world view which by

extension determined bio-ontological value and vice-versa" (46). This imperial Western humanism made possible "the ongoing displacement of local knowledge (or culture-specific orders) by a hegemonically (re)produced but no less epistemically violent Western scientific conception of the cosmos" (3). Jackson goes on to argue that this onto-epistemology (this culture) takes as its object of study the black female figure to (re)produce an enabling myth that constitutes a "common sense" dependent on racial hierarchies. She elaborates that in the period of German idealism in the decades following Kant, Hegel in his philosophy privileges transcendence over immanence by understanding these concepts as oppositional roles of raciality. Citing reports on African religions, Hegel determines that Africans are governed by the senses and as a result are incapable of taking distance from nature and from "bestial dimensions of self" (6). For Hegel attaining inward freedom is first attained by opposing one's immediate existence. Accordingly, one must rise above one's natural/sensuous existence via internal reflection to attain spiritual freedom, and this transcendence is basis for one's entry into the domain of culture *and* history.

By offering an example of post-colonial science fiction that disrupts the logic of the enabling myth, Jackson discusses how such myths can also be productive. The myth (i.e., the Western onto-epistemology that constitutes universalizing notions of perceptual knowledge by the cultural and scientific observations and degradations of the "Other," that Jackson theorizes as the black (mater)nal) produces a sense of vertigo.[4] This unsettling proprioception can potentially reorient our sensory perception by making us aware of the myth and how its representations perform. For example, a sense of disorientation denaturalizes taken-for-granted assumptions foundational to what Jackson calls "worlding process" (9), i.e., the ways in which hegemonic myths project themselves as fact, or how notions of social/racial

[4] Theorized here and by Frantz Fanon (1952, 2020) as the lived experience of blackness where one is always disoriented and out of place in a world not made in their image.

stratification are experienced/sensed as the “natural” order of things. While Jackson unpacks the potentiality of unsettling sense-abilities induced by a sense of vertigo, I look at the ways Bermúdez-Silverman, Campos-Pons, and Walker unsettle gustatory/aesthetic orientations to attune us to other under-considered sense-abilities not reliant on the practice of “sweetening” racializing practices.

THE ALCHEMY OF SWEETNESS

Alchemy, as a chemical science and speculative philosophy, brings the study of materiality and imagination in proximity. María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s intimately personal, career-long interrogation of the ramifications of cane sugar and her (self-proclaimed) alchemical art practice provides me with the opportunity to adopt alchemy as an experimental analytic framework (Lewis-Cappellari 2020). In the OED, alchemy is defined as “the medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy aiming to achieve the transmutation of the base metals into gold.” Alchemy also refers to “the discovery of a universal cure for disease, and the discovery of a means of indefinitely prolonging life.” There are two inherent meanings in the practice of alchemy that I find generative. On the one hand, it's a study of how to procure wealth by turning ordinary metal into precious gold; and on the other hand, it is a study of how to enrich health by preventing disease and prolonging life. Though this medieval European process centers how the alchemist executes an experiment of what could be called either human hubris or human desire, alchemy, as the precursor of chemistry, also refers to a series of complex and dynamic synergetic interactions/reactions that don't just alter inorganic matter, but also human and non-human organic bodies and environmental conditions, i.e., in order for the transformation and transmutation of base metals to occur the alchemist has to embody those precious qualities they would like reflected in the resulting alchemized materials. The dual connotations of the alchemical process, one of wealth and the other of health, provide a way of considering how

sugar has altered and been altered through a dynamic series of interrelated processes—as materiality has fed and fueled imagination and imagination has fed and fueled materiality.

I'm specifically interested in the way Campos-Pons enacts alchemy by creating a multi-sensorial aesthetic experience to transform a material that has caused such insurmountable damage. A strategy that in 'affect' disrupts the tyranny of the visual that has traditionally conditioned perceptions in the spaces that exhibit art—a scopic privileging that has also contributed to the objectification and subsequent racialized violence inflicted on those that have historically labored to produce sugar. As Campos-Pons's work exhibits, alchemy occurs when the senses are awakened to the vitality of materiality. In other words, if sensorially sensitive, orientations and perceptions, like materials, are malleable—a practice that when deployed reorients our tastes for an ingredient that has turned bodies and sites into ruins.

I consider alchemy foundational to a Black Caribbean materialist analysis as it helps me to bring together the study of materialism (the recognition of the agential/animating properties of matter) and of phenomenology (the study of our sensorial orientations towards matter) to showcase the relational practices that inform sugar's performance, and that provide a path to consider, contest, and transmute reified sensorial orientations. While alchemy conceptually drives the analyses in this dissertation, as each of the selected art works, in a way, transmute taken-for-granted perceptions of sweetness and sugar, it also dramaturgically structures the layout of the chapters. The art works featured provide me with an entry point to frame the dissertation thematically by delving into the poetics of sugar—the material and symbolic resonance—excavating how the cultivation (the caring), the harvesting (the cutting), the processing and refining (the extraction and whitening), the distillation (the alchemy), and the consumption (the tasting) of cane sugar are re-produced and re-staged performatively in the public/cultural sphere.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In Chapter 1: "Racial Tasting and the Performance of Sugar," I analyze what representations of sugar perform in what Zakiyyah Jackson calls "worlding processes" by foregrounding how taste(s) have engendered certain depictions of a racialized/gendered sugar woman to 'sweetly' (re)appear. I primarily focus on Kara Walker's 2014 monumental public art installation of a sugar-coated Mammy/Jezebel that, in epic proportions, exemplifies a charged history of the taste of/for imagery that (re)presents the refined 'sweet' qualities of those black(ened) for the (re)production of sugar. I consider how such representations are conditioned by and condition visually reductive practices of consumption, I call acts of racial tasting. This widely popular and controversial exhibit provides an opportunity to unpack how the sweet taste of/for sugar create the conditions of possibility for the fabrication, (re)production, and pleasurable consumption of a racial myth.

Chapter 2: "'Living the Sweet Life' and the Bones that Haunt Sugar" questions the ideologies/technologies surrounding sugar's seductive whiteness. Generally, the more highly refined the sugar, the whiter the color and the more preservable it becomes, yet the process of refining to preserve the shelf life of sugar is predicated on killing all organic matter. Thinking through Mel Y. Chen's notion of racial mattering as an ordering of the world based on what is considered more or less 'alive,' I explore the meaning of the slogan "Living the Sweet Life" of a suburb in Sugar Land, Texas. In this chapter I unpack the bio-necro-political dimensions of materiality that sustain but that also have the potential to disrupt a certain way of living by looking at Sula Bermúdez- Silverman's series of "haunting" life size dollhouses made of sugar which could serve as a poignant metaphor for the Houston suburb of Sugar Land, Texas. Here I consider how an affluent neighborhood deeply invested in the preservation of that affluence, was recently confronted with the inconvenient unearthing of a mass grave of ninety-five African American inmates who were part of the convict leasing

system that harvested cane for the Imperial Sugar refinery in town at the beginning of the 20th century. I bring Bermúdez-Silverman artistic work in dialogue with the ensuing conflict in Sugar Land to explore the tensions of how the taste for the sweet life, like sugar, is preserved by an investment in "whitened/sweetened" aspirations and ideals. I consider Bermúdez-Silverman's artistic framing as an analytic frame to question how constructs/structures predicated on aspirational notions of refined whiteness, as publicly displayed in a town like Sugar Land, are "sweetly" reproduced and preserved, but also haunted and unsettled by their material (re)production.

Chapter 3: "*Azúcar Negra*: On the Alchemy of Sweetness" explores the ways María Magdalena Campos-Pons distills the spirit of sugar. The artist re-appropriates the abandoned sugar mills where her ancestors, Afro-Cubans and indentured Chinese laborers, were worked to the bone by fabricating an alchemical laboratory that in the process of distillation transforms and revitalizes abandoned ruins into spaces of creation. Drawing from Caribbean scholars including Alejo Carpentier, Edouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter I delve into how Campos-Pons disrupts the anti-black logics of racial mattering by bringing to the fore the disregarded peoples and cultures that converged to produce one of the first ingredients of globalization. I primarily focus on two more recent installations that center the materiality of sugar to explore how she centers her laboring body to transform sugar into a work of art, the process of making alluding to sugars arduous history (as experienced by her ancestors) and its poetic resonance (as an ingredient of cultural production and her art). I argue that her alchemical objective is not to transform a base substance (blackness) into an 'object/subject' of more value, a practice that reproduces a hierarchical logic, but rather that her alchemical, artistic, *embodied* practice is one that attempts to transmute that which has not mattered into something that matters by re-orienting our sensibilities towards devalued labor practices and histories.

In the Afterword, while reflecting on the implications of the study I also briefly discuss how future scholarship could forefront the first site where sugarcane was cultivated in the "New World" —the modern-day nation states of the Dominican Republic and Haiti—to delve into the persisting ways sugar feeds racial imaginaries with terrorizing consequences. Here I argue that sugarcane harvesting still informs the manner in which racial violence is enacted, by examining how laboring bodies that have historically cut cane in the region become "surrogates" (Roach 1996) of the cane, as the sugarcane "scripts" (Bernstein 2009) state sanctioned performances of racial terror (Bharucha 2014).

Throughout this dissertation I consider how the faculty of taste is constituted by the interplay between the material (the gustatory) and the symbolic (the aesthetic), interrogating how the aesthetic taste of/ for certain representations are habituated by gustatory orientations and gustatory tastes by aesthetic orientations. By focusing on the multi-modal embodiment of gustatory taste I can delve into what is served by numbing this sensing faculty and what is awakened by gustatory tastes' contribution to aesthetics. I, therefore, can analyze the unconsidered faculty of taste that contributes to the way certain characteristics appear, like, for example, how the white refined sweetness of sugar informs the way Kara Walker's *Subtlety* takes its gendered, sexualized, and raced form. It allows me to critically address the "sweet" seduction of "whitened" investments, of what "living the sweet life" entails as signified by Bermúdez-Silverman's dollhouses that are made of sugar. And it also opens the possibility to more capaciously sense how Campos-Pons's *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*—that is conceptually and materially multisensory—disrupts the disembodied myth of transcendence associated with the habituated hierarchy of the visual and auditory senses. Ultimately, the contributions of the artists noted above open paths to perceiving otherwise that provide opportunities for unconsidered matter(s) to be valued differently.

CHAPTER 1: THE TASTING

Racial Tasting and The Performance of Sugar

"I dream of the sugar woman. Again." Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*, p.130

Invited to create an artwork that would mark the impending demolition of a factory in Brooklyn, New York at "the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker confected: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant* " (Creative Time 2014). *A Subtlety,* temporarily manifested into a 35 by 75 foot phenotypically black, voluptuous, nude feminine figure in the shape of a sphinx with breasts, buttocks, and vulva prominently on display, adorned with mammy kerchief, all coated in white sugar and accompanied by life-size "pickaninny" attendants dripping in molasses[1]—arousing sentiments that drew widely publicized controversy, attention, and praise (Boucher 2017).

As the public waited in exceedingly long lines to enter what quickly became the public art event of the summer the first thing that they would have encountered, elegantly scripted on the decrepit factory wall, was the title providing a moment to contemplate how the *Homage* might appear (McDonald 2014). Although many who attended were likely aware that the work centered those enslaved in sugar's production, and that the provocative antebellum imagery deployed was a reflection/critique on how blackness has been aestheticized and consumed in the U.S., several attendees were observed taking comedic selfies while simulating sexualizing acts of either touching and or metaphorically licking/tasting the denuded sugar-coated sphinx (Ioanes 2018). Such simulations were so unsettling for some viewers that it energized a group of artists/activists, not associated with Walker or the presenters, to hold vigil by wearing name tags proclaiming "WE ARE HERE"

[1] Images of the exhibit can be accessed here: https://hyperallergic.com/125592/what-does-kara-walkers-sugary-sphinx-tell-us/

to underscore the presence of those marked by the anti-black legacy of such 'sweet' consumption (Goodman 2015).

The polarizing reception detailed above opens inquiries into the contradictory ways that the *Marvelous Sugar Baby* was perceived/experienced. Was the 'spectacular' nature of the exhibit the only thing generating such animated and animating responses? How were perceptions of sweetness and how were perceptions of blackness contributing to the way the work acquired its distinctive form? How, for example, were gustatory and aesthetic orientations contributing to the way the *Sugar Baby* was produced and consumed? Walker's temporal, site-specific installation provides an opportunity to unpack how the sweet taste *of* and *for* sugar created the conditions of possibility for the fabrication, (re)production, and pleasurable consumption of a racial myth. By exploring how sugar, refined from sugarcane, is represented, I foreground how taste(s)— a sensory experience that unleashes the desire to consume more— have engendered depictions of a sugar woman to 'sweetly' (re)appear. I examine how such representations are conditioned by and condition what I call acts of 'racial tasting,' while speculating how taste(s) might also disrupt a 'common sense' dependent on the subjugation and hierarchization of matter. Paying close sensorial attention to the material/gustatory and symbolic/aesthetic traces of sugar, I interrogate how this 'tastemaker' has fed the racial imagination (Rankine/Lofferda 2019).

A SUGAR WOMAN APPEARS

In a recurring dream/nightmare, a chimerical sugar woman materializes as ancestral ghost and foreshadowing presence in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998). The historical fiction depicts how Amabelle Desir, a young domestic worker, barely escapes from the genocidal massacre of those presumed to be Haitian—a euphemism for Black—under the

orders of the dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo in 1937.[2] The title alludes to the gruesome labor conditions experienced by cane cutters, a labor force consisting primarily of Haitian migrants, who often worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week during the *zafra* (the harvesting period) with machetes that crudely cut seven-foot-high cane in the scorching heat. Sugar cane workers were forced to live on *bateyes* (sugar plantations) in what could barely be called 'living' quarters. Danticat writes *The Farming of Bones* not only as a way of memorializing historical events that had until that publication been widely unacknowledged, but the author also draws attention to the predominately black labor force in the Dominican Republic that continues to work under deadening conditions on *bateyes* today (Danticat 2014). As Danticat further describes many of these laborers after working cane fields were left "penniless and with only the tattered clothes on their backs, they were often scarred and mutilated, like soldiers coming home from the war" (314). The farming of cane meant and continues to mean being worked to the bone.

The title also conjures the mass graves of the hastily discarded bodies produced by the massacre that in Spanish is referred to as *el corte*, — the cutting, and in creole: *kout kouto-a*— the stabbing.[3] Danticat clarifies "The order was mostly carried out by Dominican soldiers, some of whom used machetes to hack their victims in order to make it seem like the killings had resulted from disputes between Dominican landowners and Haitian peasants" (312, 313). "The cutting" literally/metaphorically exemplifies the way people, of all ages, were indiscriminately murdered with machetes and "cut" in the same manner as the cane. In

[2] Initiated by Trujillo, a former plantation guard, the massacre lasted just a little over a week and killed anywhere between nine thousand to forty thousand Haitians. The number is unclear because of the way that many of the bodies were disposed of. Much of the migration that has been permitted from Haiti to the Dominican Republic until today only permits Haitians to work on *bateyes*. See: (Danticat 1998: 312,313); (Danticat 2014)

[3] Also widely referred to as the "Parsley Massacre" because when Dominican soldiers "would hold up a sprig of parsley and ask what it was. If the person responded by trilling the "r" in *perejil* (Spanish for parsley), he would be free to go. Anyone who didn't trill the "r" was thought to be a Haitian Creole speaker — and was likely to be killed." See (Bishop, et.al 2017).

this genocidal context, the black body became a surrogate of the cane. The novel depicts the production, excavation, and memorialization of those targeted in *el corte*.

In a recurring dream Amabelle experiences before fleeing the genocidal massacre, she (re)encounters a "sugar woman" dressed in a ballooned dress, who is wearing a shiny silver muzzle that is harnessed onto her face to keep her from eating the sugarcane she's harvested (PBS [undated]). When she appears the sugar woman is surprised that Amabelle can see and hear her; she is an invincible force that has been sensed. Addressing Amabelle, she dances coquettishly while shackled, and Amabelle, frightened, thinks that the sugar woman has been summoned by her boyfriend, a cane cutter who will soon meet his untimely death. Just before de-materializing, she tells Amabelle "told you before… I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity" (Danticat 1998: 131). While muzzled—indicating how she is not permitted to speak of her shackled condition nor taste the sweetness of the cane she's cultivated—the sugar woman's haunting (re)materialization is there to remind and warn us of the bitter repercussions surrounding the mass (re)production of sugar.

Imperially marked and gendered as *Hispaniola*, *Ayiti* became the first site sugar cane was planted in the Americas[4]— an introduction that initiated the transportation of enslaved Africans to the "New World." While sugar began to dramatically modify global tastes, it simultaneously expanded and fueled a practice of visually marking those condemned to toil and die on cane fields to satiate ever increasing profit demands (Mintz 1986; Robinson 2005; Williams 1994). Materializing as a ghostly figure in 1937, more than a century after the Haitian revolution ended slavery, the sugar woman re(appears) in Danticat's 1998 novel as a premonition of an inevitable probability. The sugar woman is cautioning those who sense her, that the tastes cultivated by the mass production of sugar will most certainly lead to a

[4] The indigenous Taíno name meaning "land of high mountains" (Ferdinand 2021, Ramírez-D'Oleo 2022).

reproduction of racial violence. Prohibited from the sweet pleasure or material rewards of the cane, the sugar woman carries with her shackles and her muzzle the legacy of black racialized slavery and sugar production. She is a ghostly presence that is bound to (re)appear, back from the future to predict the violence of a catastrophic assemblage.

A SUGAR WOMAN RE(APPEARS) AS THE FAVORED CHILD OF CAPITALISM

Divided into two sections, the first ninety-five pages of *Cuban Counterpoint*: *Tobacco and Sugar* (1995, [1940])) contains an allegorical comparative description of national products that Ortiz describes as "the two most important personages in the history of Cuba" (4). The second, more scholarly section— ''The Ethnography and Transculturation of Havana Cigars and the Beginnings of Sugar in America"–supports the essay's conclusions with historical data uncovering the ways in which these agricultural goods have come to dominate Cuba's economic history. Applying a poetic historical methodology to distinguish sugar (a foreign ingredient, for foreign consumption and profit) with Cuban tobacco (a potent symbol of masculinity, indigeneity, and pride) Ortiz provides a frame of analysis to consider tobacco and sugar as primary actors in a material history of social relations.

By understanding commodities as personages rather than simple objects, Ortiz alludes to Marx's commodity fetish, where "things" have come to have intrinsic value at the cost of erasing the labor that produced them. However, according to the late anthropologist Fernando Coronil in his introduction to *Cuban Counterpoint* Ortiz develops a "counter-fetishism." "Without making reference to Marx, he shows how the appearance of commodities as independent entities, as potent agents in their own right, conceals their roots in conflicted relations of production, and confirms a commonsense perception of these relations as natural and necessary" (1995, xxvi). This naturalization and the way the personages of sugar and tobacco perform is evident in how the main characters are emphatically gendered, "sugar is

she; tobacco is *he"* (6; emphasis in the original). The following passage is indicative of the counterpoint structure and the raced and gendered connotations of the two:

> Tobacco requires delicate care, sugar can look after itself; the one requires continual attention, the other involves seasonal work; intensive versus extensive cultivation; steady work on the part of a few, intermittent jobs for many; *the immigration of whites on the one hand, the slave trade on the other*; *liberty and slavery*; *skilled and unskilled labor*; hands versus arms; men versus machines, *delicacy versus brute force*. The cultivation of tobacco gave rise to the small holding; that of sugar brought about the great land grants. In their industrial aspects tobacco belongs to the city, sugar to the country. *Commercially the whole world is the market for our tobacco, while our sugar has only a single market*. Centripetence and centrifugence. *The native versus the foreigner*. *National sovereignty as against colonial status. The proud cigar band as against the lowly sack*. (6,7 f. emphasis mine)

Tobacco is given the preferred masculine role that is representative of the more desirable features of Cuban culture. Sugar, by contrast, is feminized, racialized, and stands for the most destructive features of foreign profiteering. Sugar, with its ties to capitalist interventions (the single market referenced in the text is that of the U.S.), is both the modernizing and enslaving force that is associated with foreign domination and the racial categories through which productive relations emerge. As an ingredient that has "opened its legs" to foreign capital, in sugar Ortiz finds a history of colonial and imperial penetration while potent tobacco exudes sovereignty and national pride (3). Sugar, therefore, is by 'nature' open and willing to the exploits of *Sir Capital*. This is telling as it reveals how, while there is an urgent need to address the increasing infringement of U.S. backed sugar interests on the economic sovereignty of Cuba, black and generally male labor is depicted as feminine, passive, and in need of patronage from potent *Don Tobacco*. Ortiz while setting up these

binaries, however, avoids identifying counterpoint as total conflict, it's "just a bit of friendly bickering, which should end, like the fairy tales, in marrying and living happy ever after" (93). In fact, the book closes with the mock ''marriage'' of *Don Tobacco* and *Doña Azúcar and* the birth of their lawless kin *Alcohol*. The heteronormative reproduction of strong and virile tobacco and "wanton" sugar present opportunities for future economic growth, that is, if *Don Tobacco* can domesticate *Doña Azúcar*. Ultimately the attributes that Ortiz assigns to sugar conflate the nefarious practices of a historically exploitative industry with the workers associated with its production. [5] The visual descriptors deployed are a metonym for a 'problem' that is deviantly sexualized, gendered, raced, and in need of fixing, while *Doña Azúcar's* perceived sweetness serves as an indicator of her agreeable nature and her willingness to comply.

A SUGAR WOMAN (RE)MATERIALIZES AT AN IMPENDING DEMOLITION

Ideas for how a *Subtlety* might appear came to Walker after reading the late anthropologist Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986). Mintz, indebted to the work of Ortiz, offers an anthropological, social history of sucrose consumption (in the "West") beginning with the earliest periods of significant availability (after the growth of colonial sugar plantations in the Caribbean) up to its ubiquity and into the late 20th century. As sugar production moved closer to European kingdoms in the 16th and 17th centuries, it began to be

[5] In her review of *Cuban Counterpoints: The Legacy of Fernando Ortiz* (2004), which brings together a series of essays that analyze and celebrate Ortiz's scholarly contribution to Cuban history, Lillian Guerra claims that "it would be wrong to identify *Cuban Counterpoint*: *Tobacco and Sugar* as one of Ortiz's many books on anti-African racism, a kind of 'missing link' to Ortiz's work in the years after 1940 when he went on to explore the issue much more deliberately and passionately." Guerra further addresses how the authors that contributed to the book would undoubtedly agree, however, "where they differ lies in their willingness to explore the conflicting and winding road Ortiz traveled before getting to this stage, one that involved vocal championship of biological determinism and social Darwinism for the first thirty years of his scholarly life." She points out how scholars Patricia Catoira and later González Echevarría uncover the ways that Ortiz initially "perceived blacks as people with a primitive mentality and strong inclination to lust and violence. It was a race that had to be 'civilized' to ensure the country's progress and well-being" (656). Ortiz's perception of those of African descent, therefore, is one which had not yet 'evolved' during the writing of *Cuban Counterpoint.* See (Guerra, 2007)

used for opulent decorations called subtleties, sculptures molded out of sugar that would adorn tables attended to by the highest echelon of society, the royals (88). Due to its cost and difficulty to attain, it was a symbol of status for men in power. Mintz writes: “By eating these strange symbols of his power, his guests validated that power” (90). The sucrose-sculpted centerpiece that dominated the exhibit at the Domino factory, in evoking the memory of a mammy monument that was almost erected in 1923 Washington D.C., in turn, monumentalizes the mass consumption of a symbol of status and power fabricated by those attempting to validate their roles as masters.[6]

Walker’s *Subtlety* —that conjures Danticat’s sugar woman but materializes like Ortiz’ *Doña Azúcar* —divulges how black bodies have been linked to consumable commodities while unsettling the abstraction of labor that Marx identified as key to the commodity fetish and workings of capitalism (1977: 163f.). The *Marvelous Sugar Baby,* rendered as a black feminized domestic figure in refined white sugar, brings one specific group of the *overworked and unpaid artisans* who produced sugar to the fore.[7] As homage, the exhibit draws attention to a racially demarcated labor force integral in the production of sugar while also showcasing how that labor has been repeatedly/reductively visually (re)presented and consumed. A *Subtlety*, in epic proportions, exemplifies a charged history of the taste *for* imagery that (re)presents the refined ‘sweet’ qualities of those “black(ened)” for the (re)production of sugar.

Some defining elements of Walker’s work include her use of narrative imagery that augments and evokes racist as well as violently sexual content and often features a character known as “Negress.” (Gopnik, 2014). Christina Sharpe (2009) delves into Walker’s repeated

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[6] Located in RG 66 General Files, 1910–1954 (National Archives Identifier (4685889)) (cited according to Matthews 2013).

[7] Producers of sugar also included indentured servants from China and Europe (Hu-DeHart 1994; Turner 1974).

and controversial use of the “Negress” as mammy, by interrogating Hortense Spillers’ and Saidiya Hartman’s respective theories of pathological excess and subjectification. Sharpe argues that it is this mythological archetype that “shores up racial divides and intimate intra- and interracial familial dynamics, at the same time that she, in her place, secures all the other subjects in their positions in the social fabric” (25). It is the mammy figure surrounded in Walker’s work by stereotypically figured slave boy attendants—a portrayal underscoring the depiction of children who weren’t meant to be taken care of but rather crafted to attend to the needs of others[8]—who serves an important function in (re)producing Ortiz’ favored child of capitalism. The mammy is concocted to provide sustenance not for her own but solely for the reproduction of the relations of production. In other words, her fabricated position is designed to ground the racial hegemony’s ability to maintain and reproduce its dominance. And her affective sweetness? —an indication of contentment, or pleasure, or both as she assumes the (re)productive role she’s been assigned?

The fantastical fabrication of the Southern sweet black mild-mannered caregiver, which also served as inspiration for Walker’s rendering, was almost constructed into a national monument in Washington D.C. when in 1922 the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) resurrected a proposal from a Tennessee senator, who 16 years earlier had initiated a plan to honor the “Mammies” of the South. The monument originally had not received much attention or support, but by 1922 Senator Charles Stedman of South Carolina submitted Senate Bill S. 4119 to commission a “Monument to the Faithful Colored Mammies of the South,” which granted the UDC clubwomen from the Jefferson Davis Chapter permission to begin construction. Much controversy surrounded the design elements for the proposal that included the “Mammie” cradling a white child while her own children bustled around her clinging at her skirt for attention and affection (Matthews 2013). Images of white fantasies

[8] echoing plans for the “Monument to the Faithful Colored Mammies of the South”

representative of how, as Hartman (1997) writes "Blacks [were] envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment" (1997, 23). As Tera Hunter (1997) excavates in real life most caregivers were often young black girls, mere children themselves, who were charged with the care and maintenance of white children.

The latest proposal came just seven years after Woodrow Wilson screened *Birth of a Nation* (1915) at the White House, a film that was emblematic of an era distinguished by its old South nostalgia as pastoral myths, like those that slaves were better off during slavery and that emancipation and Reconstruction had been calamitous, were cinematically portrayed. Its popularity reignited Ku Klux Klan membership and marked "The Great Migration North" as Black Americans began to flee Southern regions in mass numbers escaping domestic terror, and oppressive Jim Crow laws while looking for better work opportunities (Hunter). Plans for the monument in 1922 incited justifiable outrage from black community members as leaders like W.E.B. Dubois from the NAACP and club women from organizations like the Northeast Boundary Citizens' Association came together to write newspaper articles and letters to both congress and the president at the time Calvin Coolidge (Matthews, McElya 2007). The historical significance of the Mammy in Southern lore and its need to be monumentalized with fervent indignation concludes W. E. Du Bois' *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924):

> Above all looms the figure of the Black Mammy, one of the most pitiful of the world's Christs. Whether drab and dirty drudge or dark and gentle lady she played her part in theuplift of the South. She was an embodied Sorrow, an anomaly crucified on the cross of her own neglected children for the sake of the children of masters who bought and sold her as they bought and sold cattle. Whatever she had of slovenliness or neatness, of degradation or of education she surrendered it to those who lived to lynch her sons and ravish her daughters. From her great full breast walked forth governors and judges, ladies of wealth and fashions, merchants and scoundrels who

> lead the South. And the rest gave her memory the reverence of silence. But a few snobs have lately sought to advertise her sacrifice and degradation and enhance their own cheap success by building on the blood of her riven heart a load of stone miscalled a monument. (123-24)

This argument as Rachel Kennon (2019, 147) writes, "reflects the key oppositional refrain in the Negro newspapers as well. A representative headline from the *Chicago Defender* blasts: 'Thus do the southern whites cling to an illusion. Who is deluded?'" (147). After organizers and activists invested their free time and emotional labor the bill went no further and plans for building the monument died on the senate floor (Matthews).

Walker's ephemeral monument, sugar coated and designed to last through the course of the exhibit, by contrast, was rather fabricated to be deconstructed.[9] Walker's Sphinx-like, Janus-faced mammy/jezebel's spectacular caricatured qualities reflect paradoxical de/hyper-sexualized depictions of feminized blackness in the ante/postbellum United States. As Sarah Haley (2016) excavates, black women's "aberrant" qualities, as perceived by the white dominant class, defined the gender ambiguity of black women as either the masculinized, unsexed caretaker, i.e., the mammy or the sexualized, bestial, sin-filled jezebel. These racial tropes, or more precisely symbolic gestures that render material effects—that as Haley aptly demonstrates can lead to incarceration and brutalizing terror—uncover dimensions of how the black female body was deemed knowable and subsequently valued.

The ambiguity of the feminized black figure is indicative of the legacy of racial slavery and its imaginative capacities, which as Hartman (1997) explicates, "asserted that the captive female was both will-less and always willing" (81). Hartman analyzes this paradoxical duality, which renders will and consent inviable, by delving into the fraught definition of the slave as both a person and property. Hartman describes that the laws in the

[9] The core of *A Subtlety* was made of Styrofoam blocks that were then coated in white sugar

antebellum South balanced this tension by conjuring the notion of seduction. As Hartman states. “The dual invocation of person and property made issues of consent, will and agency complicated and ungainly. Yet the law strove to contain the tensions generated by this seemingly contradictory invocation of the enslaved as property and person, as absolutely subject to the will of another, and as actional subject by relying on the power of feelings or the mutual affection between master and slave and the strength of weakness or the ability of the dominated to influence, if not control, the dominant” (80). As Hartman further explains, “[r]ape disappeared through the intervention of seduction—the assertion of the slave woman’s complicity and willful submission. Seduction was central to the very constitution and imagination of the antebellum South for it provided a way of masking the antagonistic fissures of the social by ascribing to the object of property an ensnaring and criminal agency that acted to dissimulate the barbarous forms of white enjoyment permitted within the law” (87). The captive female’s ambiguity, which lawmakers attempted to fix in stone for public display after Emancipation, is by design “willing” to have her children “lynched” and herself or her offspring “ravished” if it be the will of a lawmaking system designed to benefit her master.

The paradoxical racial tropes that contribute to the spectacular nature of Walker’s Sphinx and that also make her stereotypically recognizable, could also allude to the liminality of blackness critically addressed by Zakiyyah Jackson in *Becoming Human* (2020). Jackson, in her critique of posthumanism’s romance with ontological slippage, discusses the inherent problems of “plasticity.” Her argument centers around the predicament of blackness as limitless form—under the regime of liberal humanism—as constant malleability is demanded of the black figure that can be any type of form at will, and on command (22). As Jackson writes “Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that

blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold potentially "everything and nothing" at the register of ontology" (19,20). The ambiguity of the black female body, the plasticity of her form in Western ontological traditions as Jackson argues, lends itself to her subsequent treatment as "biological matter" dispensable for medical examination and experimentation.

This notion of plasticity is indicative in the legacy of Saartjie Baartman's exhaustively explored/dissected body, which Walker's nude "bestial" sphinx additionally conjures. The prominent display of the animal-like Sphinx's exposed vulva, her prominent backside, and bulbous bare breasts parallel the origin story of the exhibition of black women's sexual organs for the pleasure and "scientific" curiosity of Western audiences—an audience that would conclude that her "overt sexuality" proved that she was the missing link between animals and humans (Gilman 1985). First displayed for her physiognomy—specifically her posterior and genitals in the beginning of the nineteenth century in England and later in France— Baartman is ultimately dissected for the body parts that brought her fame that were subsequently put on display at the museum of natural history in Paris, the Musée de l'Homme, until 1974 (Gilman 1985). Baartman's "spectacular" form was first attributed animal-like qualities and then her form was cut into several pieces—her bodily parts treated like specimens, or as "infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter." Such conceptions of the black female body as a specimen for experimentation would prove highly influential in medical fields like gynecology as J. Marion Sims the so-called "father" of the profession in the nineteenth century felt justified in experimenting on countless enslaved women without anesthesia as he sought solutions for his medical inquiries (Jackson 2020, 436).

Walker, whose signature style has been defined by her use of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medium of the flat, two-dimensional cut-paper silhouette chose to work with the three-dimensionality of sculpture for the first time in this exhibit. *A Subtlety*

was not only cut but also carved and molded in absurdist/sense-disrupting proportions—a choice that reflects the economic, social, cultural, scientific, and political formations that derive value from a phantasmic invention that is trans-formable—a shape-shifting fabrication that Hortense Spillers (1987) poignantly addresses:

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented … markers so loaded with 'mythical prepossession' that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. (65)

In Walker's 2014 rendition, *Brown Sugar*, this time molded and reified into a 'refined' white *Sugar Baby* to make crystal clear the national fantasy of those who have profited, benefited, and been *entertained* by such a malleable invention, reflects how she is "marked" with race, sexuality, and gender. But for such markings to be (re)productive, easily consumable, *and* pleasurable— to "innocently" and or "seductively" inspire even greater amounts of consumption—she is also made to be sweet.

Walker employs the over and under sexualized racial tropes to the physical traits of the sugar sculpture, that like the bestial Sphinx and her riddles both entraps because of her recognizable form(s), while also twisting those forms and conventions. The animating characteristics of the *Sugar Baby,* however, are the ways in which the figure embodies the dissonant qualities of such tropes: she is not sexed she is hyper-sexed; she is not racialized she is hyper-racialized; she is not sweet-she is super-sized sweet; she is not human she is larger than life; she is not will-less or willing she is an undeniable force. In her book *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011) Nicole Fleetwood argues

that the affective power of black bodies within contemporary visual discourse have prompted spectators to regard blackness as a “problem” that needs fixing, as the (in)visibility or hypervisibility of black bodies agitates the dominant visual field. *The Marvelous Sugar Baby* designed for viewership/consumption before the impending demolition of the Domino Factory, signifies both the monumentality and the inevitable ruin wrought by the racial tropes projected onto her figure that then take form. The shape shifting sphinx while alluding to the problematic plasticity of blackness, crumbles the 1923 Mammy proponents’ fixity of marble and stone. The towering duplicitous mammy/jezebel, her ephemeral nature, her aesthetic excess disturbs any possibility of solving her riddle. Unlike Ortiz’ *Doña Azúcar,* her blackness and sexuality are not attributes that can be fixed or solved. The not-so-subtle *Subtlety* disrupts any reductionist attempt at consumption by “troubling,” i.e., denaturalizing the sweetness ubiquitously attributed to sugar.

BOUND TO (RE)APPEAR

The sugar women depicted in these scenes of historical fiction—a novel that takes place in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, a poetic material history in Cuba, and a temporary figurative monument at the Domino Refinery in the U.S. —with wide-ranging valences embody stories of the production and consumption of blackness and sweetness since the arrival of sugar cane to the Americas. The atemporal nature of their conceptions allows us to look at what sugar performs as a social actor in a racialized material history that is contingent upon but also far exceeds the specificity of national origin. Although historically incongruent, as the scenes (re)present shifting accounts of how black bodies have been tethered to sugar, Danticat, Ortiz, and Walker present allegories that in their poetic registers encapsulate past, present, and allude to a future where the (re)presentation of black(end) bodies for the (re)production and consumption of sugar take not only a similar figurative form but, some, also acquire ‘sweet’ characteristics. While Danticat’s sugar woman, as spirit

sensed, tells us of her inevitable (re)materialization within a logic that alchemizes bitterness into sweetness, the essentializing ‘sweet’ qualities of Ortiz’s sugar woman draw attention to the conditions of possibility for the reification of her fabrication. Walker’s super charged *Marvelous Sugar Baby,* in laying bare the product of that ‘thingification’ process, provides an opening to experience her historically easy/pleasurable consumption. However, by centering and hyperbolically exaggerating the *Marvelous Sugar Baby’s* ‘sweet’ features the work also unsettles her reification, gesturing towards to the myth of her (re)production while sensorially disrupting the naturalized ‘sweetness’ of her consumption.

With these depictions I’m interested to explore what they indicate about the performativity of race in relation to sugar, and what this unearths about those relations that resonates today. In other words, I want to draw attention to what these (re)presentations tell us, what they perform, how they matter. As Jackson (2016) further elaborates the fraught relationship between blackness and representation “Moreover, one could argue that the longstanding black feminist preoccupation with representation, in particular the seemingly inescapable burden of paradoxical modes of visibility/invisibility, do not primarily gesture towards the (in)accuracy of representations but rather toward the performative labor representation does in worlding processes” (9). What is Amabelle’s sugar woman trying to tell us about this “worldling process” when she proclaims “You, my eternity?” Why does the sugar woman return, why is she bound to re(appear)?

While considering Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) that explores how the black body was rendered visible through quotidian forms of violence and the “innocent amusements” of the white ruling class, I look at the scenes presented above for analysis into how the perceptive faculties of sight *and* taste are conditioned, linked, and deployed. The sugar woman, in varying versions, materializes as an embodiment of a political economy, immersed in a political ontology, that has marked bodies with raciality (Wynter 2003). A

raciality that, as Cedric Robinson (2000) rigorously excavates, precedes anti-black racism. As Robison tells us capitalism was racial because that form of social stratification was already long practiced in Europe and alludes to the inevitability of racialities visual reduction: “As an enduring principal of European social order, the effects of racialism were *bound to appear* in the social expression of every strata of every European society no matter the structures upon which they were formed. None was immune” (44), (emphasis mine). Huey Copeland, who takes the title of his book *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (2013), from the passage above, elucidates Robinson’s remarks stating that for racial hegemony to continue, “the black body, as a locus of discipline, disrespect, and disempowerment, must be pictured” (11). I contend that under the logics of racial capitalism the black body in relation to sugar is bound to appear, gendered, raced, and for those markings to be easily consumable and pleasurable, they must also ‘taste’ sweet. I argue that sugar’s material and symbolic (re)production has contributed to the way sweetness and blackness are aestheticized, and that this co-relates and informs the way racial subjugation is consumed. The depictions above encapsulate a history of visual/signifying practices that materially marked certain bodies for sugar’s (re)production, while also gesturing towards other perceptive faculties that abet and elude hegemonic descriptive systems, like the sense of taste.

TASTING RACE

As Valérie Loichot (2014) noted about a sensory experience aroused at the Walker exhibit:

> At first, we smell the scent of sugar familiar as confectioned sweets and candy. One visitor puts her nose to one of the figures. “At least it smells good,” she says. But it only takes a few minutes to whiff the acrid stench of old sugar, a smell like that of meat or flesh rotting in the trashcan in the back of a restaurant on a hot afternoon. The

sweet rancid air mixes with urine and corroding iron. Suddenly, we're lost characters in a Grimm tale.

Sugar, like its taste, is meant to smell, look, and feel sweet, an expectation cultivated by past consumption. However, as noted by the reviewer, as one immerses themselves further in the details of the site, perceptions of sweetness quickly turn to something more sinister. How the distinguishing capacity of sweetness is conditioned and communicated, and how this conditioning affects the ways in which we encounter, perceive, consume, and contest racialized notions of sugar are central to the arguments I make in this chapter.

A distinctive perceptual quality of sugar is its sweet taste, a biological disposition that has enabled us to discern between foods that are edible/rich in calories/ sweet or inedible/toxic/bitter-- hence our seemingly 'natural' inclination for sugar. However as Israel Ramirez (1989) interrogates, the relatively low nutritional value of sugars reveals how the "perception of sweetness cannot be used to accurately meter the metabolizable energy or nutritive value of a food" (125). While the direct experience of sweetness is generally regarded as pleasurable, except in cases of excess (Drewnowski et al. 2012), a sugar-related gustatory experience might also bring about abstract concepts, images, memories, or bodily feelings that guide moods, emotions, and affects as well as aesthetic judgments. Such experiences entail insights into the sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of specific subjects (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999; Sutton 2010).

Yet such insights are not as direct as they might first appear. Vivian Sobchack (2010) argues that however direct an experience might seem they are not solely mediated by our lived bodies but that our lived bodies as well as our experiences of them are always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things. "Thus, our experiences are mediated and qualified not only through the various transformative technologies of perception and expression but also by

historical and cultural systems that constrain both the inner limits of our perception and the outer limits of our world" (4). This perhaps gets to the essence of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his perceptual inquiries meant when he stated "If indeed we place ourselves within being, it must necessarily be the case that our actions must have their origin outside us, and if we revert to constituting consciousness, they must originate within. But we have learnt precisely to recognize the order of phenomena. We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle" (2005: 528). This inextricable tangle is important when considering how taste(s) factor into the way objects appear to us—how they emerge—and how that encounter is experienced.

Walker in her artist lecture titled "Sweet Talk" (2014), discusses elements of some of the sinister/dark qualities the reviewer Valérie Loichot was sensing. Drawn to the project after visiting the abandoned Domino Refinery, Walker reveals that the residue of molasses that was sticking everywhere made it appear as if "the walls were weeping." Such contemplations kept leading her to thoughts of ruins, bodies ruined throughout its production, "black ruins," "having one's identity ruined," "dietary ruins," but also "ruins that offer potential," remarking that she wanted to "conceptually create a space where people wanted to deal with neglect." She further elaborates that she didn't know how to make a piece about death and destruction, so she ended up creating the inverse, stating "I wanted to make something people wanted to see," that incorporated elements of "anxiety and doom." As a result of her artistic/ historical research *and* her site-specific sensorial immersions the *Sugar Baby* began to take form.

The sweet materiality *of* and hence the desire *for* sugar, which is posited on the notion of pleasure, are essential elements of the *Sugar Baby's* production. Her look, her bare 'delicious' curvature, her seductive smell, her literal/figurative sweetness are all attributes of what makes her irresistible to consume. Tunning into the erotics of such consumption and

using Vincent Woodward's (2014) formulation, the *Sugar Baby* is indicative of a "delectable object who is not so much literally consumed as tasted, erotically desired, and cultivated" (37). The white façade of Walker's black Sphinx is essential in setting her trap of seduction. In coating the phenotypically black *Sugar Baby* in refined white sugar, Walker implicates a historical investment in the taste for refined whiteness, that myth of purity that enables the innocent consumption of an ingredient that was/is produced through the exploitation/destruction of black(ened) bodies, while displaying how blackness in such an 'innocent' world does/should taste/appear. Walker in "Sweet Talk" gestures to this by underscoring how sugars production/fabrication is dependent on the "dismantling of darkness to ensure perfect whiteness." As Glenda Carpio (2017) in her analysis of Walker's *Subtlety* notes:

> Refining takes out impurities, turning dark molasses into purified, decolorized syrup that is then crystalized to produce white refined sugar. The process suggests a racial metaphor for how whiteness is produced at the expense of darkness…Walker's giant "Black" sculpture in whiteface exposed the "impurities" constructing whiteness, making explicit the forms of desire propelling its claim to power. (554)

The dark molasses sugar boy attendants—the nine out of twelve that shattered and melted into sticky pools—as by-products of the 'whitening' process serve as devastating examples of such desires/investments/refinements. Walker's renderings intimate how gustatory and aesthetic orientations historically have turned acts of racial violence into sweet products for mass consumption because, at whatever costs, the taste *of* and *for* sugar should *feel* good.

The unsubtlety of the oversized, larger-than-life *Sugar Baby* both gestures towards an insatiable desire to consume more while underscoring the inability of sustaining her pleasurable consumption—any attempt would nauseatingly exhaust or destroy. Walker doesn't just hyperbolically deploy racial tropes and "trouble" the visual field; she also uses an

enormous amount of sugar thereby "troubling" aesthetic/gustatory orientations linked to its pleasurable consumption. To reiterate: "The direct experience of sweetness is generally regarded as pleasurable, except in cases of excess" (Drewnowski et al.). While sugar dissolves quickly once consumed, it can have lasting effects. The more frequently sugar is consumed, the more its lasting effects are felt/experienced. The longer sugar lingers the more it rots its consumer. Sugar, *her* excess, is not only a medium of oppression, but an avenging force. By monumentalizing the materiality *of* and desire *for* sugar Walker created a monumental ruin that like Danticat's sugar woman is there to remind and warn us. The sugar woman is asking us to pay attention to the taste(s) that have fueled the demand for her 'sweet' mass (re)production with ruinous consumptive effects/affects.

PERFORMING TASTES

While historically conditioned taste(s) contributed to *A Subtlety's* formal qualities, expressions of taste(s) also animated the polarizing ways that the exhibit was contemporaneously perceived and consumed. The title of the work—an homage in the style of Walker's parody of nineteenth-century slave narrative title conventions—gives spectators the only formulated language with which to interpret the sculpture and the attendant black molasses figures. The only other signs that were placed throughout the exhibit actively encouraged visitors to post pictures of their experience. As Jamilah King (2015) noted, "Nearly everyone had their phone out and the Instagram hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino was filled with images of the exhibit… In that way, it was a deeply interactive exhibit, one as much about the present as the past." Viewers were, therefore, confronted with what was on display and how they and other members of the public were interacting and documenting the exhibit. As Kennon (2019) notes, "The theatricality of *A Subtlety*, evocatively staged as an open-access, interactive experience in a crumbling relic to sugar refining and processing, brilliantly lends itself to the expansive reach of the social media age. Viewers attended in

droves to meditate, blush, or stand in awe of its monumentality" (144). Ultimately the exhibition drew over 130,554 visitors, 24,164 Instagram posts with an average attendance of 5,000 a day on the weekends it was open (Sutton 2014). It was according to the New Yorker "the first masterpiece of the social-media age" (Scott 2017). *A Subtlety,* constructed *on the occasion of a demolition* continues to (re)materialize when located on digital records––her lasting effects reduced to pixelated imagery.

Though Walker's fame originated from the display of her two-dimensional silhouettes, according to Lorrain Cox (2007), her 2005 installation at the REDCAT in Los Angeles titled *Song of the South* marked a shift in Walker's artistic strategy or as Cox elaborates, that show was indicative of a moment when her work took a "performative turn." Here Walker's light and projection-based installation (depicting her signature characters) integrated the viewer's shadow onto the images, making it a dynamic part of the work. The shadow of the viewer created a scenario where the audience became part of the pernicious narrative, or as Cox writes, enveloped the public into "a greater sensory embodiment of trauma" as the viewer was drawn in to consider their own "racial, sexual, gendered and or class/consciousness" (60, 61). Walker's most ambitious project to date is one that includes the "performative" engagement of her audience, but on a far larger scale.[10]

Inside the exhibition the artist created several emotive strategies to induce the public's participation. First, they were asked to fill out release forms and then encouraged to post images and comments under the hashtag #karawalkerdomino ("Digital Sugar Baby"). At times an instructional voice over a PA system prompted the public to come close and to touch the main attraction. While there weren't any instructions to physically touch the little molasses boy attendants, in the warm summer months as they were slowly melting they

[10] The reception ultimately became a by-product of *A Subtlety* with Walker commissioning a video of its consumption titled *Kara Walker*: *An Audience*. See Walker's *Sweet Talk* (2014)

created sticky puddles that one had to strategically walk around, creating a metaphorical stage of complicity for the public to act out their role inside the exhibit while also providing a "sticky" stage to enact responses to how other people were (re)acting to the exhibit.[11]

Much has been written about the fraught social drama that unfolded: Who was the audience? Who was the work intended for? Who was looking? How were they looking? How should they be looking? (Miranda 2014). While some found the *Sugar Baby* 'tasty,' to the point of gustatory simulation, some found such simulations 'taste-less' and painful to witness, with many, perhaps, oscillating in between. What I want to draw attention to, or rather what I'm interested in interrogating here, is not the (in)appropriate way people were interacting with the work but rather how gustatory and aesthetic orientations were animated by and animated expressions of taste(s) that in turn contributed to the way the exhibit was sensed/felt/experienced. How were expressions of taste(s) also producing meaning? As the artist herself reveals in an interview:

> I put a giant 10-foot vagina in the world and people respond to giant 10-foot vaginas in the way that they do. It's not unexpected. Maybe I'm sick. Sometimes I get a sort of kick out of the hyper essay writing, that there's gotta be this way to sort of control human behavior. [But] human behavior is so mucky and violent and messed-up and inappropriate. And I think my work draws on that. It comes from there. It comes from responding to situations like that, and it pulls it out of an audience …. (Miranda)

There is no doubt that the "10-foot" vagina elicited sensational responses, yet it was the performance of "black" and "white" social behaviors surrounding the work, scripted long before audiences arrived at the display of the *Sugar Baby*, that also animated its aesthetic sense.

[11] See "Kara Walker - An Audience (Trailer)." Vimeo, 2014, vimeo.com/112396045

There was an encounter by a group of youth from a program called Critical Exposure that underscores the charged and polarizing sentiments on display. One member wrote an essay, excerpts of which I quote here: "This is a personal reflection on my experience with the Kara Walker exhibit in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Having no audience in mind, this was written for personal reasons, but I invite others to read it and take what they will from it." - Malik T., Age 18

> One of the worst things about my experience with the Kara Walker exhibit in Brooklyn was the lack of space available for me to neither mourn the devastation of Blackness, nor appreciate its power. There were white bodies everywhere I turned; white bodies laughing, white bodies posing for pictures, white bodies giving me strange looks as I solemnly shuffled around the warehouse, white bodies overflowing the space, white bodies spilling into my physical and mental space. (T. 2014)

What Malik is expressing is how his experience of the work felt out of place amidst the reaction that other members of the public were having, attributing the jovial, lighthearted consumption of the *homage to the overworked and unpaid artisans* with the perceived whiteness of the audience. As Jamila King (2014) wrote: "the presence of so many white people – and my own presence as a black woman who's a descendant of slaves – seemed to also be part of the show."

In Ilka Saal's *Collusions of Fact and Fiction: Performing Slavery in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker* (2021), the author examines the performative techniques that artists like Parks and Walker deploy through their controversial use of racial stereotypes–– adopted and augmented by both artists— and the affective force of the audience's encounter with such tropes. The title, a reference to a quote from Walker, refers to how history is accessed. In the context of transatlantic slavery, there is no meaningful way to recuperate the histories of the innumerable subjectivities that were brutally turned into

numerical statistics as recorded in official archives. Such elisions leave a void that might be engaged by recognizing the collusion of fact (the material realities of that void) and fiction (the desires and anxieties that get projected onto that void). Saal explicates how Parks and Walker defamiliarize such tropes through strategies of parody and satire to interrogate their contemporary valence. According to Saal, this is an affective approach as it disrupts habitual practices of perception by compelling the beholder to reflect on their own participation in racial formations. However according to Malik, and other people who wrote extensively about their experiences at the exhibit, there appeared to be people who weren't considering their centrality/complicity in such racializing formations. As Malik relays members of the public did not appear attuned/sensitive to an homage to those enslaved to produce sugar as they laughed and took selfies.

Reactions to *A Subtlety* that were eliciting strong expressions of unease, frustration, and anger ranged from the lighthearted and jovial to the objectifying and sexualizing. As Nicolas Powers (2014) wrote "I strode to the front, turned around and yelled at the crowd that when they objectify the sculpture's sexual parts and pose in front of it like tourists, they are recreating the very racism the art was supposed to critique." Kennon writes,

> The indignation that Powers vocalizes over the pantomimed sexual and racial violence in the contact zone of the Domino Sugar factory recalls bell hook's apt conceptualization of "Eating the Other," the consumption and prompt forgetting of the subaltern. Although the sugary substance of the sculpture lends itself to this metaphor with its obvious resonances with the sugar commodity of slave economies, it also encourages slower digestion and absorption of notions of alterity, demanding recognition of viewer complicity in this process of *Othering.* (154, authors emphasis)

Such encounters of unreflective complicity are what sparked the "WE ARE HERE" campaign noted in the introduction–-a campaign that was neither affiliated with Walker or

Creative Times, where volunteers inspired by the indignation of the way *A Subtlety* was being consumed (like those who organized against the 1923 Mammy monument) disbursed themselves throughout the long lines and throughout the exhibition to pass out information pamphlets and black, rectangular stickers that read "We Are Here" (Goodman 2015).

Malik goes on to discuss how the lighthearted and sexualizing reactions were infringing upon the way he would have preferred to have experienced the exhibit. He could not avoid how the materiality *of* and desire *for* sugar had dictated a visually reductive practice of mindless consumption, a kind of racial tasting that the work on several levels reflected/critiqued *and* evoked/elicited amongst its viewers. When considering the performativity of race in relation to materiality Robin Bernstein (2009) asks, "how do people dance with things to construct race?" (69). Proposing that there are elements of material culture that "script" racializing gestures, she refers to an archival image that depicts a woman imitating the same expression as a larger than life, bestial caricature of an African American eating watermelon—an act reminiscent of the selfies taken during the exhibit where people simulated acts of tasting the disrobed sweet 'teet' of the mammy. Referring to Louis Althusser's 'scripting' scenario, Bernstein highlights how a process of interpolation occurs the moment a person acknowledges and responds to *the hail*, a response that occurs not only through the verbal but also through bodily encounters in the material world. Bernstein elaborates: "The scriptive thing hails a person by inviting her to dance. The person ritualistically engages the matter, and in that process, subjectivation how one comes to "matter" — occurs" (73). In the case of *A Subtlety* the materiality of sugar not only scripted the works distinctive/essentializing characteristics, but it also scripted distinctive/essentializing behavior. We could attribute the perceived whiteness of the audience to the behavior that was on display. When members of the public (un)consciously reenacted the pleasurable consumption of a symbol/product designed to profit from and

substantiate the racial hierarchy of matter, racial meaning making was not only on display it also reinscribed who and what historically has mattered.

Malik's feelings of infringement, of not having the space to respond to the work without being subsumed by the behavior on display led to his own assertion of preference when he suggested to his friends to pose in front of the mammy sphinx holding up the Black Power fist. As Malik recounts: "And as we stood there, with our fists defiantly raised to the ceiling, the mostly white people in front of us became much quieter, they seemed offended even. Khadijah says she heard people whispering, "It's not about that..." (T. 2014). Malik was not only distraught by people's expressions of taste, but also by the responses to his expression. What was it he was sensing/expressing that elicited such a dismissal? By stating that "it's not about that" someone was asserting that their direct experience of the exhibit was universal, i.e., they were negating other ways of perceiving the work—an example, perhaps, of what Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021) claim about "the universal impulse of liberal humanism to create a way of thinking, being, knowing, feeling, based on their own image."

The behavior elicited, the charged and contradictory, the fun and pain-filled expressions of tastes on display at the Domino Refinery are why as Kennon notes "some of Walker's detractors have accused her of reinforcing distorted histories and racist antebellum imagery for the delight of white audiences and the mainstream art establishment" (147). Such contestations have plagued Walker's work throughout her career with critics arguing that the racial tropes she deploys, replicate the imperial gaze and reinforce stereotypical images of white supremacy (hooks 4, 7). I tend to agree with Fleetwood, Saal, and Kennon's assessments that Walker's work, that augments stereotypical representations, has the potential to trouble/disrupt racializing acts of consumption. I would, however, add to those arguments that the work also underscores the representational inescapability of the legacy of slavery

within a political ontology/economy that continues to prosper and (un)consciously enjoy the "sweet" degradation of blackness.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF SUGAR'S EMERGENCE

What other methods could be explored/applied/adapted to interrogate sensorial orientations towards matter that don't assume a universalist positionality? How can we consider the intimate relations, the "inextricable tangle" that enable phenomena to appear? Sara Ahmed (2007) proposes that we examine the indirect ways that phenomena are experienced by asking what it would mean to orient ourselves not to "the thing in itself" but to that which must take place for something to appear, underscoring how the "thing-in-itself" appears only if we erase the relations that produce the phenomena. Her commitment to phenomenology "is not 'properly' phenomenological," it rather deviates, i.e., it queers the perceptual philosophy of phenomenology by looking towards orientations that have been overlooked, and to other disciplines outside of the philosophical cannon (2). Perception, Ahmed elucidates, is a way of facing something. When we perceive things as near to us we share residence with them. "Perception involves orientation… it depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things" (27). I can perceive an object only if my orientation allows me to see it. Deconstructing Husserl's deconstructive method of "bracketing," as a way of destabilizing the natural attitude and apprehending objects "as if" unfamiliar so that we can attend to the flow of perception, Ahmed writes that this bracketing is in practice dependent upon putting aside the familiar (33). She argues that rather than the familiar being posited as that which must be suspended to see, what would it mean to consider what is overlooked when we reside in the familiar (34). By attending to backgrounds and arrivals, both spatially and temporally, Ahmed argues, we could consider not the "thing-in-itself" but rather the conditions of an object's emergence, a method she coins an ethno-phenomenology. If phenomenology turns us towards things in terms of how they reveal

themselves, "then we might also have to follow those things around" (39). An ethno-phenomenology, therefore, opens paths to "follow things around," to tracing and assembling varying accounts of how the seemingly familiar appear. In the case of this analysis, how sugar appears, i.e., how it is tasted/sensed/felt throughout different phases of its production and consumption.

If, for example, I were to trace the background of the 162,000 pounds of sugar donated by Domino that was metaphorically 'tasted' at Walker's exhibit it might take me to areas surrounding Lake Okeechobee in Florida, where the owners of Domino Sugar harvest a majority of the cane produced in the U.S. and where every fall the smell of burning cane affects the ability of the mostly Black residents living in the area to smell and taste, and more essentially, to breathe (Mothers & Others for Clean Air). Or the sugar could have come and been refined in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana where Domino's largest operating refinery is located (Domino Sugar 2018). Here, the sight of sugar cane crops that have not been harvested in time are increasingly associated with the dwindling number of Black cane farmers in the area, who as a result of generational institutional discriminatory practices are unable to harvest sugar in time, yielding cane that tastes less sweet, garnering lower prices, and enabling a myth that Black farmers just can't harvest high-quality cane (Hannah-Jones et al. 2019). Considering the marketability of sugar made from cane, the enduring romance with this original "organic" plantation crop overshadows how its production is negatively experienced by some of those in its proximity. Its (re)production continues to sugarcoat that reality.

Or we could consider the arrival of Walker's homage at a site that at one point in its operation refined 98% of the sugar consumed in the U.S.[12] One of sugar's lurid secrets is that

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[12] The American Sugar Refining Company, Brooklyn Refinery, developed and operated continuously from 1856 to 2004 and was at one point coined the "jewel in the crown" of a sugar producing and refining empire (Novelty Theater).

the process of making sugar white entailed (for centuries) feeding sugar animal blood and bone. Animal blood was used as a technique to thicken the impurities in the sugar. The blood was accompanied with bone char, also called bone black, or bone charcoal, charred animal bones, mostly pelvic bones from cows; ground and burned. Cane sugar in its liquid form is filtered through columns made from these ground bones, which absorb colorants and impurities from liquids (Encyclopedia Britannica). As the poet Shailja Patel (2014) describes "It takes bones to get sugar white. Thousands of pounds of cow bones burned to bone char." The Domino Factory stopped using cattle blood in the mid 20th century but continued using bone char until the factory's closing in 2004. Almost half of the space within the filter house (the tallest portion of the refinery) was actually allocated to produce bone char, not sugar (Novelty Theater). There is a poignant resonance in how Walker's installation drew so much public attention to an ingredient that was essentially a by-product of a bone char-producing factory—unearthing how part(s) of what have made white refined sugar taste sweet is the materiality of blood and blackened bones.

We could also delve into how the taste for too much sugar is habituated by the options of foods that are made available, are in proximity.[13] It is by now common knowledge that Americans on average consume too much sugar. By itself, sugar is not a factor causing obesity and diabetes, but rather – when over-consumed – it is a component of unhealthy dietary trends (SugarScience 2018). Walker's supersized *Sugar Baby* not only signifies the sugarcoating of persisting inequitable power dynamics, but also intimates how the over consumption of sugar targets and affects black(ened) bodies. In "Sugar Ecologies: Their Metabolic and Racial Effects" (2019), Anthony Hatch, et al., look at the social systems that fuel global sugar production, industrial processing, patterns of distribution and consumption

[13] For info on the diabetes epidemic in sugar producing regions see: Wikkeling-Scott 2012; Healy 2011.

to discuss how sugar is directed, onto and into Black bodies (596). The study specifically traces how "These systems encompass networks of economic, political, scientific, and ideological practices that link global systems of agricultural trade under racial capitalism to the hyper-local contexts of biological exposure and metabolic processing of sugar. Sugar's pernicious effects are magnified by forces which guide sugar into Black bodies, becoming the source of extraordinary levels of toxicity and chronic metabolic disease for Black people in the United States. This burden of metabolic disease, which also affects metabolic function and gene expression, also creates demand for profit health services that palliate, but do not treat the root causes of, chronic illness resulting from exposure to sugar" (599). As unregulated access to sugar saturated foods have detrimentally entered bloodstreams, historically exploitative practices surrounding the making of sugar haunt the consumption of such catastrophic abundance.

As Ahmed posits, what is perceptually overlooked when we reside in the familiar? When thinking of/or experiencing sugar as if pleasurable, i.e., sweet we overlook some of the harrowing material realities noted above. Such "overlooking" was strikingly on display on the floor of a former sugar refining factory during the run of Walker's exhibit. The public— which was informed/made conscious of the fact that the *Sugar Baby* was an homage to those enslaved/exploited "overworked" and "unpaid" to produce sugar— in several cases (un)consciously consumed/tasted the homage as if sweet/pleasurable. Walker's *Subtlety*, a larger than life "whitened" myth materializes/appears in a world that perceptually and habitually "overlooks" the material conditions that make the production and mass consumption of sugar possible, thereby (in)advertently naturalizing/sweetening subjugating material practices. While the direct experience of sugar might appear to be sweet, and while sweetness is considered one of the 5 basic flavor components universally experienced (Drewnowski et al.), attending to the material and symbolic *traces* of sugar could unearth

opposing accounts. Sugar might also induce a sense of bitterness for those in its proximity—deemed exploitable, dispensable, dismissible—who have yet to reap its sweet rewards.

ALTERNATIVE SENSORIAL ORIENTATIONS

By attending to backgrounds and arrivals as Ahmed proposes, we can address the conditions of possibility for perceptual orientations that condition our sense-making capacities. The appearance of *Doña Azúcar* in Ortiz's poetic material history and the temporary materialization of Walker's *Sugar Baby* on the floor of the domino sugar factory both represent how perceptions of sweetness and "whitened" blackness are tethered together. While Ortiz chooses to depict sugar and the degradation of Cuba's economic sovereignty as black, feminine, and "naturally" inclined towards exploitation, Walker's homage displays how habitual acts of "overlooking" the bitter material realities that emerge under a regime of racial capitalism facilitate/enable the sweet consumption of a racial myth. The sugar women that (re)appear in Ortiz' and Walker's work, in part, embody the sense-abilities of a self-affirming system i.e., in a political economy, immersed in a political ontology determined by hierarchical distinctions the black figure in relation to sugar is bound to (re)appear, gendered, raced, sexualized, and for those markings to be (re)productive they must also appear/taste sweet. It, therefore, 'makes sense' that the appearance of the *Sugar Baby* was both informed by and elicited salacious/objectifying visual acts of consumption —racial tasting— as the work strikingly reflects a world where the sweet taste *of* and *for* sugar is made possible by the ordering of materiality based on anti-black logics/sense-abilities (Jackson, 2016). If the mass (re)production and consumption of sugar continues to disproportionately perform varying forms of violence on black(ened) bodies, the aestheticization of sweetness and blackness will be *cultivated by* and will continue *to cultivate* the way racial subjugation is so easily/deliciously consumed.

But there was another sort of sense-making that occurred at the exhibit of an *Homage…on the occasion of an impending demolition*. Several attendees who foregrounded those historically relegated to the background —the *unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes*—also felt the larger-than-life presence of the sugar woman; a spirit sensed that exceeds/escapes/disturbs/disrupts easy, care-free consumption. Spillers (1987) makes several overtures towards this notion of escape when she contends "the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus* (65). This *plus*—which Spillers shows us is deemed "pathological" in "studies" like the Moynihan report—is also a line of flight, as it exceeds the racializing mark. The sugar woman that (re)appears in Danticat's novel has the capacity to (de)materialize as spirit sensed providing us with another valence to the line "You, my eternity." The haunting (re)materialization of the sugar woman reminds and warn us of the bitter materialities of sugar's gustatory/aesthetic (re)production *and* arouses/ awakens other sense-abilities that disrupt a "common sense" dependent on visually reductive practices of consumption. Attuning our senses to the ways materials alert us to the textures of Black life, the intimate, multimodal, and indirect ways that we taste have the potential of disrupting the tyranny of the visual, opening sensory modes like touch—the haptic quality of taste(s)—that reroute expectations and alter preferences.

CHAPTER 2: THE WHITENING
"Living the Sweet Life" and the Bones that Haunt Sugar

If we were to consider the bio-necro-political dimensions of materiality that sustain but that also have the potential to disrupt a certain way of living, the artist Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's series of "haunting" life size dollhouses made of sugar could serve as a poignant metaphor for the Houston suburb of Sugar Land, Texas. Employing a material, emblematic of the bounty of Eurocentric colonialism and capitalism, to construct life size-dollhouses, Bermúdez-Silverman centers the materiality of sugar to make visible how such economic forces– historically dependent on horror-inducing racializing practices–haunt the present with their "sweet" allure. Largely comprised of model homes in affluent neighborhoods, Sugar Land, was originally named after a lucrative crop cultivated and harvested by a black(ened) labor force first enslaved and then re-enslaved—a history that of late has been whitened like plantation sugar to make the city appear ideally "sweet." However, with the recent unearthing of the unmarked graves of ninety-five inmates of African descent who produced sugarcane in the region over a century ago, Sugar Land must now reckon with material remains that expose how the city has whitened/sweetened its bitter foundations—an acknowledgement that disrupts and alters the sweet appeal the city, since its founding, has attempted to preserve. In this chapter I consider Bermúdez-Silverman's candied dollhouses as an analytic frame to question how constructs/structures predicated on aspirational notions of refined whiteness are "sweetly" reproduced and preserved, but also haunted and unsettled by their material (re)production. Framing, in construction, describes how pieces come together to give a structure its support and shape. Throughout this chapter I consider Bermúdez-Silverman's artistic framing, to frame how the ideologies/technologies historically deployed to make sugar appear sweet continue to support and shape racialized orientations in the city of Sugar Land today.

HOUSES MADE OF SUGAR

Houses made of sugar are not designed to last, as Sula Bermúdez-Silverman can attest. By melting 55 lbs. of sugar at temperatures that reach over 300 degrees on a hotplate in her studio and then cooling, molding, and soldering the material produced, Bermúdez-Silverman painstakingly builds variations of a dollhouse gifted to her as a child that has now become the blueprint for a series of sculptures.[1] The artist explains the labor-intensive, and time-sensitive process as follows: "Physically, it's very demanding. I would usually try to make a dollhouse in a day or two because of the quick changing nature of the sugar. I burned myself and the sugar a lot. I once had just finished a dollhouse and moved one thing and the whole house fell over and broke. It became very emotionally taxing" (Agustsson). When the candied sculptures survive the construction phase, they begin immediately to show signs of wear—as the transparent "sugar glass" becomes increasingly cloudy and begins to crack—making the structures volatile, ephemeral objects for exhibit (Agustsson).

The artist began using sugar as an artistic material after learning that one of her Afro-Puerto Rican ancestors was a sugar cane field laborer (Agustsson). Sidney Mintz (1960) towards the end of the 1940's and around the time Bermúdez-Silverman's great grandfather might have been working cane, began doing field work on sugar plantations in Puerto Rico and subsequently wrote a biographical account from the perspective of a laborer by the name of Don Taso. In one passage, where he discusses the different jobs available in the field, Don Taso recounts why he attempted to avoid jobs like cutting sugar cane:

> I don't like that work because it's a little dangerous. I am really afraid of it. Especially when they are cutting cane heavy with trash,[2] a machete can get easily tangled in the

[1] Images of the dollhouses can be found on the artist's website: Sula Bermúdez-Silverman Studio, https://sula.studio/neither-fish-flesh-nor-fowl-1, Accessed 19 April 2023.
[2] Trash are the dry leaves of sugar cane crops.

straw and incapacitate a man, what with so many people cutting at the same time. So, I've always been a little afraid of it…I never found it agreeable! (202)

The difficulty of working with sugar, as Bermúdez-Silverman related can be "emotionally taxing," and as Don Taso explains, the labor-intensive process of producing sugar can induce a sense of fear. Today as Terry-Anne Jones (2020) relates, within the sugarcane industry writ large, manual cane harvesting remains arguably the most dangerous and physically difficult type of work; "injuries occur with frequency, as workers are often inadequately equipped for the inherent danger of rapidly slashing stalks of sugarcane with machetes" (43). Cutting cane, still frequently accomplished with the aid of a machete or cane knife, is a labor practice historically attached to the deadening fear and likelihood of being incapacitated.

Throughout her research, Bermúdez-Silverman additionally became interested in how sugar sculptures (called subtleties) and dollhouses, respectively, were considered symbols of status and power for the noble blooded who exhibited such creations as "message- bearing" objects (Agustsson). As the meaning of sugar and dollhouses and their symbolic resonance as symbols of status and power shifted with their increasing accessibility, Bermúdez-Silverman was especially fascinated by that shift. "The connection between why I'm using sugar and dollhouses though is really my interest in their transformations and their semiosis, as well as their connection to power individually. It sort of focuses on social structures and how symbols arise and grow and change and then die and are culturally specific as well as arbitrary" (Agustsson). Mintz (2007) concisely sums up the shifting history of sugar's significance in the following passage:

> A medicine, spice, and luxury of kings in the sixteenth century was transformed into a necessity of Europe's toiling masses by the eighteenth. In its name land was laid waste, millions of coerced Africans and Asians shipped to the New World, and millions of Europeans encouraged to use sugar and stimulant beverages, sometimes in

> place of the foods they had previously eaten. In its name, courts and courtiers, slave traders and planters, refiners and confectioners grew wealthy. Now, the lands that made this wealth possible, and the descendants of the peoples who worked those lands, are much the poorer. Is there a moral? The "democratization" of consumption is now a fundamental aspect of modern life. But no one seems prepared to calculate the costs, past or present.

While sugar and dollhouses are no longer indicative of an exclusive/ elite class, their ubiquity does speak to the way power structures, cultivated by the historically exploitative systems of power from which they derived, are lived and experienced by everyday people today.

Creating sugary versions of dollhouses, "sweet" replicas of playthings, "message-bearing" objects that have historically served instructional purposes, Bermúdez-Silverman recreates a stage where "living the sweet life" has been countlessly rehearsed. The metaphor sweet, while connoting a pleasurable gustatory taste, also means agreeable in general to the senses and the mind (OED). Rehearsing for the sweet life could, therefore, be thought of as a series of enactments that aspire to a way of living that, like sugar, appear to the senses to be agreeable, i.e., desirable. The artist, however, has not designed the candied structures as seductive props to play along with the fantasy of "home sweet home." One of the dollhouses decorated with horror film paraphernalia, for example, alludes to Don Taso's unagreeable account of working in the cane fields; one of too many grim examples of the horrors surrounding sugar's historical (re)production. The sculptures Bermúdez-Silverman has created rather center the materiality of sugar to make visible the fabricated "sweetness" that masks the living nightmare of how symbols of status and power–within exploitative regimes–are attained and (re)produced. As I explore throughout this chapter, the way the artist crafts and displays the candied ideals also bring to light their ephemeral nature and structural precarities, indicating how such constructions are fragile and corruptible.

"LIVING THE SWEET LIFE"

"Nothing is sweeter than life in Sugar Land!" a platform for economic development in Sugar Land, Texas claims (City of Sugar Land Economic Development). Consisting of "master-planned communities," that appear like a series of made to order homes, the town's official website describes the area as "welcoming neighborhoods [that] enhance home values and create a sense of belonging" (City Sugar Land Overview). Sugar Land today heralds itself as one of the most diverse cities in the United States with an educated workforce, excellent schools, and a bustling town center—characteristics that, according to sites promoting the Houston suburb, make living in the area appear ideally sweet (City Sugar Land Overview). Sugar Land, however, was originally named not for the lifestyle it now promotes but for the sugar plantations that were established after settlers claiming stolen land began harvesting sugar— a series of events that introduced the region to the brutality of enslaved labor (Hardy). Following the consolidation of local plantations, the Imperial Sugar Company was founded in 1908 and Sugar Land grew steadily as a company town until it incorporated as a city in 1959 (City Sugar Land). It was the Imperial Sugar Company that drove development in the town, modernizing the refinery and building houses for employees and their families until the company filed for bankruptcy and closed its operations in 2003 (Hays). 2003 marked the end of sugar refining but the continuation of a housing boom that has made Sugar Land one of the most agreeable cities to live, in the United States (Fortune 2023).

BONE BLACK

The city of Sugar Land lists as one of its most significant historical buildings the now abandoned Imperial Refinery Char House (City of Sugar Land). The char house served an essential function of the refinery as it housed the five steps of processing milled, raw sugar cane, including affination, carbonation, decolorization, boiling, crystallization, and recovery

(Waymarking). The dimensions of char houses, in general, are determined by the large quantity of pelvic bovine bones pulverized and "charred" for the decolorization process. After the raw cane has been crushed and milled, clarified cane juice flows through the bone matter, where sugar's "coloring" matter is left behind, producing sugar's pristine white color (Bratskier). Bone char, also known as bone black, is a material that has frequently served aesthetic purposes. In the history of the arts, it has been used as a pigment to represent a deep black color, including skin tones (Colourlex). While not directly affecting the gustatory taste of sugar, bone char has been essential in cultivating the aesthetic taste, i.e., the agreeability of white table sugar ubiquitously consumed today.

As the abandoned char house still prominently looms in the skyline of Sugar Land, bones belonging to those who contributed to the mass production of refined sugar have recently been unearthed. After the city's Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD) began constructing a technology center on a former state prison property, the process was halted when a backhoe driver uncovered a human thigh bone. After several months, forensic anthropologists and archeologists exhumed the remains of 95 bodies and determined that they belonged to 93 men, one child, and a woman of African descent who ranged in age from 14 to 70. The bones, now categorically gendered, raced, and aged indicated that their owners had muscular builds but were malnourished. Misshapen from physically demanding and repetitive labor, the bones were found with shackles and other artifacts that were buried in unmarked pine boxes between 1878 and 1911. The remains, in relation to the location where they were found, led specialists to the conclusion that the bones belonged to inmates who were leased by the state of Texas to harvest cane in Sugar Land at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Convict Leasing and Labor Project, FBISD Sugar Land 95 Final Report). According to the Texas Historical Commission, the remains—now memorialized by community members as the Sugar Land 95— are part of the

first fully intact convict leasing cemetery discovered in the United States to date (FBISD Sugar Land 95).

Before “experts” arrived Reginald Moore, a local convict leasing historian, community activist, and former longshoreman and prison guard had warned FBISD administrators that since their property had once belonged to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), it was likely that the remains of former convict laborers would be buried there. Moore, who passed in July of 2020 prematurely at the age of 60, was right (George). He had spent over two decades trying to prove that leased prison laborers, who worked the Imperial Sugar plantations more than a century ago, were buried in unmarked graves (Hardy, Kim). The recent “discovery” of the bones exposed a disturbing history that drew national and international attention, initiating “lawsuits, emergency board meetings, and public demonstrations” (Ortiz). The bones of those who were essential to the production of sugar in the region not only sparked controversy and debate, but a historical reckoning. The acknowledgment of the Sugar Land 95 created a tension between what is owed and what is owned in a residential area where most homeowners in Sugar Land today, many of whom have migrated from outside the U.S.[3], have no direct connection to Sugar Land’s history (Brannen). The “new” residents now inhabit a site haunted by a past that is demanding public recognition in the present.

After many legal battles and community initiatives led by people like Moore, the remains were reinterred and buried at the site where they were found. The newly established gravesite is now accompanied by an exhibit housed in the technological center (Hite). The bones, i.e., the remains, have become part of the Sugar Land 95 Memorialization Project titled: *The Sugar Land 95: An Unsweet History* which describes its mission with the

[3] According to the ACS 2018 U.S. Census, Fort Bend County has a population of 787,858. The population is almost equally distributed among all racial and ethnic groups making it the most diverse county in the United States. (Source: "ACS 2018 U.S. Census.")

following: "By publicly sharing this information related to the history, lives, and deaths of individuals impacted by the convict leasing system, we hope to bring awareness to the racial injustices of the past and to properly memorialize the "Sugar Land 95" in the future" (FBISD Sugar Land 95 Executive Summary). The Sugar Land 95 memorial in several ways attempts to pay respect to those who were meant to be buried and not remembered. The memorial (the re-presentation of the remains) and the grave site (where the remains currently reside) are tasked with explaining how and why ninety-five bodies belonging to those of African descent were discovered in unmarked graves on a former prison yard in Sugar Land. The grave site is a place to pay respect to those who were previously relegated to permanent erasure while the memorial is there to educate the public of a history that *should* never be repeated. With the help of Moore, the FBISD has also developed an African American elective course at local high schools that centers this untold history, and fourteen of the ninety-five bodily remains are currently going through DNA sequencing to establish connections with living residents (SL95 Exhibit Guide).

Yet, as of the writing of this chapter, the Sugar Land 95 continue to disturb/agitate life in Sugar Land. There remains a glaring disparity between the way Sugar Land continues to historicize, market, and represent itself and what the remains of those who died cultivating sugar reveal about the town's brutal racial legacy. The bones, according to information surrounding the gravesite, have been "laid to rest" yet memorials, history lessons, and genetic sequencing keep the past present, or "alive" by exposing the conditions that produced "the dead" (FBISD Sugar Land 95). The acknowledgment of the Sugar Land 95 now unsettles "the sweet life" Sugar Land is deeply invested in (re)presenting/preserving, as the unearthed bones divulge the horrors inflicted to produce a whitened "sweet life" dependent on working black(ened) bodies to their early and unmarked graves. Considering these paradoxical realities, what does/can sugar now perform in Sugar Land?

Delving into Mel Y. Chen's notion of racial mattering, as an ordering of the world based on who or what is considered more or less 'alive,' and hence who or what has the right to how that "life" is preserved, I consider the multiple valences of what the motto "living the sweet life" has and might entail. Here I explore how Sugar Land— a microcosm of the American/capitalist dream—reckons with a gravesite and memorial that might topple the myth of "sweet living" it would like to preserve, while also interrogating what representative labor the unearthed "black" bones–that produced sugar and the foundational prosperity of Sugar Land–are now tasked with making taste sweet.

Engaging Robin Bernstein's notion of a "scriptive thing," as a heuristic to analyze how racial subjugation emerges through everyday engagements with the material world, Avery Gordon's elucidations on "ghostly matters," the inequitable social forces that haunt everyday life, and Sylvia Wynter's theorizations on "demonic grounds" as an "unknowable" site foundational to Western perceptual and onto-epistemological orientations, in this chapter I also consider the "haunted" dollhouses made of sugar constructed by Bermúdez-Silverman. I thematize how the candied structures expose how colonial architectures are "sweetly" reproduced by sugarcoating the living nightmare of a system that requires the endless (re)production of black(ened) bones. I bring Bermúdez-Silverman's artistic work in dialogue with the memorialization/representation of the Sugar Land 95 to examine how the taste for the sweet life, like sugar, is preserved by an investment in a "whitening" process designed to sweeten/suppress/erase/deaden the bitter materialities of its (re)production while thematizing how bones, historically essential components for the refining/ whitening process, also haunt and unsettle foundations predicated on such ideologies and technologies.

NEITHER FISH, FLESH, NOR FOWL

A culmination of seven years of Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's work and her first solo museum exhibit at the California African American Museum (CAAM), *Neither Fish, Flesh,*

nor Fowl (2020) opened for two weeks before the city of Los Angeles was shut down as result of the Covid 19 pandemic.[4] As the multidisciplinary artist recounts: "Luckily, it wasn't the first time showing most of that work, but it was the first time showing to that audience, and also showing the dollhouse series, which was made specifically for CAAM" (Agustsson). Set in a city undergoing a severe housing crisis only exacerbated by the pandemic, Los Angeles is exemplary of the increasingly unattainable quintessential American dream of single-family home ownership—a dream/desire held by many who reside in the U.S. today that, like the uninhabited miniature replicas Bermúdez-Silverman represents, is mostly aspirational. As if set in a post-apocalyptic film depicting the aftermath of a global pandemic, the dollhouses remained unvisited and in a state of decay throughout the course of a year. During the Covid lockdowns, they became paradigmatic of the notion of home as both a place of shelter and entrapment, or as one reviewer deftly noted "In a city of Zillow envy, it reminds us of the Tuareg proverb: 'a house is a coffin for the living'" (Poundstone).

Because of their ephemeral nature, when the exhibit was reopened to the public, most viewers would have experienced the sugary sculptures as they were showing structural deficiencies—a "drag" for the artist who had spent an emotionally and physically taxing time creating them, but also an opportunity for the beholder to tune into their temporal poetics (Agustsson).

> I guess that's the way I'm also approaching the closure of the show and the slow deterioration of the dollhouses sitting in limbo in the gallery for almost a year now. I've gone in to check on them three or four times now and structurally they're holding up for the most part, but there is a bit of sagging and drooping. The sugar itself has

[4] See museum site for images and video by the artist: "Sula Bermúdez-Silverman: Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl," California African American Museum, https://caamuseum.org/exhibitions/2020/sula-bermudez-silverman-neither-fish-flesh-nor-fowl, accessed 19 April 2023.

sort of mutated and the houses that are coated in resin have gone from a transparent to a translucent, so I'm sort of looking at them as tangible markers of time. (Agustsson)

When considering the historical significance of sugar and dollhouses, the passing of time in the case of the "sweet" structures gesture towards ruin—the ruin wrought by their material (re)production, their own inevitable ruin, and the lasting effects of ruins as they conflate temporal distinctions between the past, present, and imminent future.

Comprised of six central works all housed in one large room, *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl* is named after an idiom derived from a medieval proverb which defines a class of people that don't quite fit into a specific category; or relates to something that appears to be partially one thing and partly another (The Free Dictionary). The show, as the CAAM site communicates, reflects a practice where "Bermúdez-Silverman mines her personal and familial histories as a woman of Afro-Puerto Rican and Jewish descent" (CAAM). Correspondingly, the exhibit plays with identificatory classifications that allude to her mixed cultural, religious, and racial heritage while also unsettling symbolic tropes of categorization.

Much of the work deals with crafts associated with feminine activities such as embroidery, dollhouse building, quilt making, and hair braiding. While distorting the gendered connotations of the objects she renders through such craft work, the artist like the feminist art movement of the 1970's, simultaneously brings the art of craft into the realm of contemporary/conceptual art. Through the practice and art of crafting, the artist deploys what I am calling an unsettling aesthetic. Adopting Sean Metzger's (2009) formulation, who utilizes the term when thinking about the "imaginative investments" that characterize migratory movements and particularly "the unmooring of a stable spatial referent" in identificatory constructs, like Metzger I am interested in the notion of unsettling "in the sense of negating affective fixation (settling) on an object" (318). I employ the term unsettling in a different context to describe Bermúdez-Silverman's artistic strategy as a negation of affective

fixation on taken-for-granted sensorial orientations, i.e., the tastes attributed to seemingly familiar categorizations and constructs.

Recalling W.E.B. Dubois' graphic data portraits, visualizations that attempted to represent a spectrum of the Black American experience after slavery was abolished for the Paris World Fair of 1900, in her series, *DNA Portraits* (2016-ongoing), the artist transfigures "genetic data," sourced from family members' ethnic DNA screenings, into colorful, embroidered, pie charts. The framed graphs appear as a stand in for series of family portraits.[5] Dubois' innovative and artful data visualizations were designed to convey a literal and figurative representation of "the color line"— a survey of the racial segregation that persisted after slavery was banned, important for Dubois to debunk the myth that Reconstruction had been a failure.[6] In Bermúdez-Silverman's renderings, familial relations are replaced by a color-coded system that, taken together, offer a portrait of the complexity of genetic makeups that render isolated, identificatory classifications reductionist, if not futile. *DNA portraits* rather portray how genetic data can expose the myth of biological race while still representing its material/structural manifestations. *DNA portraits* also "prove" how the visual representation of data points inevitably fail to provide a "complete" picture.

Table for Eleggua, Table for Elijah (2018) an altar-like circular table comprised of two halves with a hole in the middle, references in its title the religions of Santería and

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[5] Beginning in 2016, Bermúdez-Silverman conducted DNA tests for herself and her family members, translating the results into embroidered patches–a process that revealed how her African ancestors worked on sugar plantations in Puerto Rico. See CAAM Facebook video post https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=401908161137559, accessed April 19, 2023.

[6] Jason Forrest writes, "In 1900, Du Bois had the opportunity to design and curate 'The Exhibit of American Negroes' for the Exposition Universelle in Paris. He writes in his autobiography: 'I wanted to set down its aim and method in some outstanding way, which would bring my work to the thinking world. The great World's Fair at Paris was being planned and I thought I might put my findings into plans, charts and figures, so one might see what we were trying to accomplish'" (Forrest). Forrest's article can be found at https://www.tableau.com/blog/how-web-du-bois-used-data-visualization-confront-prejudice-early-20th-century. A related article from Smithsonian Magazine is available at https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/first-time-together-and-color-book-displays-web-du-bois-visionary-infographics-180970826/, accessed April 19, 2023.

Judaism practiced by the artist's two grandmothers. The two halves of the table are connected to caster wheels that enable the table to come together into a donut shape or help create "a pathway so that we can physically walk in-between the two halves of the circle, which is in-between being inside and outside" (CAAM Facebook video). With the table(s), Bermúdez-Silverman invites the beholder to enact the in-betweenness suggested by the possibility of positioning the tables in infinite ways. While the circular table suggests that one could walk around the outside or the inside to experience the objects on the table, the finality of a perspective is contested. The two halves of the circular table are mobile, thereby suggesting the inviability of the distinction between "inside" or "outside"—a disorienting sensation that unsettles a relatively fixed vantage point by which the beholder can experience the items the artist has selected to display.

On the tables the comical and profane are paired with the sacred and sublime as the artist has placed everyday found and made objects that reflect mixed religious and popular/cultural/sexual practices. Some of the items include "Drakels," a pun on dreidels that are branded with pictures of the Afro-Jewish rapper Drake, hair picks,
Elijah's ceremonial cup used to pour wine during the family seder dinner on Passover, clay dominos, butt plugs, Manischewitz concord grape wine, a lazy kate (a device used to hold spools of yarn that the artist has replaced with her own hair), and references to the Afro-Caribbean deity Eleggua, the orisha of caminos, i.e., of roads and paths. The idea of passing or passing through, of being both inside and outside a circle, of objects passing for one another, in referencing the deity of paths and pathways also raises questions about the daily practices/rituals we engage, the paths we take that shape and support the constellation of factors that constitute identities. As Bermúdez-Silverman discusses the constellation of objects:

> I'm interested in syncretism and the things that emerge from it. When we look at our history we can see that many cultures and groups of people intersect and intertwine, so each of the objects occupy a position of ambivalence — the human hair becomes yarn and the picks look like forks. I'm interested in the way that the subject positions can easily be changed, and also in showing that boundaries are unstable, and categories can fail. (Agustsson)

The artist's interest in categories that fail, i.e., that are unable to contain the content they are prescribed to define, is made evident not only by her multi-colored pie charts that purposefully "fail" to provide a complete picture of kinship, but also by the items that are placed on the table, or rather have found a seat at *Eleggua and Elijah's* table. Here objects that connote religious, racial, and or sexual practices assigned to things like dreidels, hair picks, and butt plugs aren't segregated into categories of importance but rather all the objects and the practices that they allude to are placed at the table—a constellation that resides on non-hierarchical mobile space for public display and multifaceted engagement.

Embedded into the tabletops are two-multi-channel video installations *Duck Test* and *Removal of Faux Locs Installed by Nkechi Diallo (aka Rachel Dolezal)* (both 2018). In *Duck Test*, a reference to the practice of abductive reasoning connoted with the expression "If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck," Bermúdez-Silverman enlists Rachel Dolezal the controversial, disgraced white civil rights worker/activist who for several years identified/passed as black, to braid *faux locs* into her hair. "The reason I was so intrigued by her was that all she did was change her hair in order to become "black."… She's somebody who manipulated her hair to appear black or mixed when Black women are marginalized for wearing their hair natural and lighter skin or white-passing people are questioned about their heritage" (Wheeler). *Removal of Faux Locs, which* plays on a meditative loop as the artist dissembles the artificial hair installed by Dolezal, in

turn becomes “a thinking gesture” that examines “Dolezal’s role as a figure symbolic of Americas fraught history of ethnic and racial taxonomies” (Agustsson).

The craft of unsettling categories of belonging is complicated by the incorporation of Dolezal braiding *faux locs* onto the artist. Considering the themes of passing that resonate throughout the exhibit, the choice perhaps underscores the refusal to settle in a predetermined category; of thinking of identities like accessories or costumes that can be purchased or borrowed and can be worn or taken off like *faux locs* while also signifying the fragility/precarity of a practice that connotes concealment—i.e., the longer one “passes,” the greater the shattering consequences if found out. Dolezal’s desire to play “black,” however, most centrally underscores the power and privilege of those who can or cannot “pass.” Such passage inadvertently reaffirms a racial hierarchy of being, i.e., it reasserts the inescapabilty of the racializing mark of blackness under the current regime of the Western “universal” human that grounds/enables the myth of whiteness that can “choose” to be whatever it would like to be. The incorporation of Dolezal unsettles the myth of belonging as a benign or “equalizing” impulse because it reveals the colonizing architecture that initially afforded Dolezal the possibility to opt in or out of racializing mark(s) not afforded to those she wished to emulate. In other words, by centering herself as black, Dolezal inadvertently reaffirms the privilege of her white positionality.

The charged racial politics of hair, and the art of utilizing it as an artistic material, have been central to the artist’s work and included in the exhibit is a constructed yarn swift and drop spindle (*3c/4,* 2017) wrapped in a hexagon featuring copious amounts of Bermúdez-Silverman’s dark brown hair, and her found lace doilies (2014–17) carefully embroidered with hair instead of thread. For several years Bermúdez-Silverman has collected her own hair and spun it into yarn, a material she feels occupies a liminal or transitional state, which the artist physically deploys in *Table for Eleggua, Table for Elijah.*

> I guess I'm really interested in this idea of the third space, which originates from post-colonial theory and that Homi K. Bhabha speaks of — a valid space beyond the normative binary. I think it's a place that I often occupy. I think that many of us do. So, when I spin my own hair into yarn, it becomes another material in the work and the form kind of serves as the space that's in between. It sits on a swift and the swift is a tool that's used to wind yarn into a skein, so the yarn is not yet being used to make something, but it's also gone beyond the initial fiber of hair. (Agustsson)

As the artist divulges, objects like hair and yarn that can pass for one another, and her artistic practice where those materials also become the subject of the work, reference the slippage/failure of the utility of categorizations that prescribe utilitarian limitations—this failure is what unsettles categorical distinctions that subsequently orient the beholder to the "space beyond the normative binary."

The artist's practice of collecting and saving found objects that might normally be discarded or ignored, like ones shedding hair, is further put on display in the series of quilts she has made/ designed out of clear plastic. *Red Hook, New York*, 2015; *Austin, Texas*, 2018; *Los Angeles, California*, 2019–20, three quilts that are hung from the ceiling are comprised of individual squares filled with color-coded detritus found/ collected in the cities listed in their individual titles. The items include objects like ticket stubs, lighters, an empty raison snack package, and someone's torn nametag. In the transparent quilts the thrown away and homeless become part of a tapestry that marks how the discarded do not just disappear, the remains rather mark the passage of time that has attempted to forget them. With these quilts, Bermúdez-Silverman offers the public a possibility to participate in unsettling a sense of value. In the plastic quilts (crafted to house/hold the thrown away) the seemingly worthless become valuable with the attention and care that the artist and now the beholder bestows on that which, under ordinary circumstances, might be deemed disposable. Value, in this

context, is derived not from the reification of the art object, but rather on the practice, i.e., the craft of paying attention, noticing, and taking care of how and what one discards that can/could/might find alternative purpose(s).

The premier work, which the artist began constructing a year prior to the exhibit, features life-size dollhouses—one made from glass, and nine cast in sugar. Like the artist's quilt making, where she finds purpose for discarded/homeless items, Bermúdez-Silverman places found and reused objects, from chewed gum to discarded bumper stickers, strategically inside the transparent/ translucent model homes. The candied dollhouses are devoid of dolls or miniature, human-like figurines; they rather house remnants that have been left behind or forgotten. Positioned side by side, the dollhouses that sat upon pedestals were placed at eye level of the beholder. Divided equally into two evenly distributed strategic straight lines, the candied structures made from the same blueprint but with their own decorative motifs, resemble the model homes of a master planned community.

The dollhouses, which are (re)created from heated sugar and poured into a mold to form "sugar glass," are a reproduction of "real" miniature sized homes that are themselves a replica of "model" homes, while in the rest of the exhibit items that might be found in a home like the tables, the quilts, and the yarn swift are rendered in "real" life size proportions. Sugar glass is often used in film, theatrical productions, and professional wrestling to simulate real glass (Wikipedia). Playing with notions of mimesis, Bermúdez-Silverman, like the Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons who through the laborious process of artistic creation (re)enacts the labor of her ancestors, chose a material, glass, that is produced in similar manner as sugar, muddling the distinction between how the material and the symbolic are made and reproduced. Here again the artist plays with notions of materials that can (for a time) pass for one another, temporarily unsettling the practice of distinction. The glass structure, however, while in a precarious state because of its fragile materiality has the

possibility of maintaining its structural integrity. While the glass house could/might break, the sugar houses with certainty will cloud and crack and sag. The materiality of sugar inevitably will lead to the dollhouses structural ruin, while the glass, a fragile indicator of a condition before ruin, by comparison, enables the beholder to reflect/witness/experience the dollhouses made of sugar in their state of decay.

Ultimately objects that have either been discarded, shed, deemed inappropriate for display, have lost their taste, or are in a state of ruin find refuge in a quilt, on a yarn swift, on a table, and in a miniature home, the items selected, and the technologies deployed rupturing long-established categories of kinship, belonging, privilege, and value. Through the art of crafting, the artist unsettles aesthetic sensibilities/orientations predicated on Western aesthetic philosophical traditions and rather invites the beholder to experience the worthwhileness of "feminine" technologies that make art out of "disposable things." Together the work which stems from personal experiences, more broadly addresses identificatory constructs that are dependent on maintaining and reproducing rigid taxonomies/points of view, while the artist's craft work renders absurd— as the title of the exhibit suggests—the logics and daily practices that undergird such reifying systems of classification and distinction.

DOLLHOUSES

For the CAAM exhibit, the artist decided to re(craft) a childhood plaything, a dollhouse gifted to her by a family member. Dollhouses, now readily purchased from countless retail outlets and commonly gendered as feminine objects of play, were originally crafted in the West in the seventeenth century for the ruling or elite class (Varat 2017). Like subtleties, the sugar sculptures that lavishly adorned the banquet tables of European royalty in the 16th and 17th century, dollhouses were, as Nancy Wei-Ning Chen (2015) writes "luxurious artefacts for adults' amusement," that were put on prominent display (279). Bermúdez-Silverman discussing her fascination with the genealogy of the dollhouse, notes:

> What's so interesting to me about dollhouses is that actually they were intended for adults, so they were originally off limits to children. They were called "baby houses" and were for an incredibly privileged minority because they cost as much as a regular-sized house and were used to show off wealth, just the same as these sugar sculptures. There's also a shift in the gender-oriented organization of the dollhouses. They were first a male-oriented object, but then they became this female model of domesticity and a pedagogical tool for little girls to learn how to run a household. (Agustsson)

Dollhouses, later designed for the children of the elite had "a more didactic function" as they were "seen as part of useful training in domesticity" (Chen 279). The didactic function of playthings, like dollhouses, is addressed by historian Doris Wilkinson (1974):

> Play objects are not merely items for fun, but function directly and indirectly to maintain existing beliefs and behavioral systems. They are not material trivialities. . . Both games and toys provide a looking-glass reflection of the larger society; and one cannot offer a meaningful commentary on these cultural artifacts without evaluating them in the broader network of the systems in which they were constructed and in which they were played. (100)

Dollhouses, as "objects of play" that "function directly and indirectly to maintain existing beliefs and behavioral systems" could therefore be thought of as miniature replicas of a structuring system that provides a stage to rehearse an aspirational way of being in that world.

As dollhouses, in subsequent centuries became more affordable and readily available, their ability to inspire young children (especially the little white girls targeted in their marketing) to perform what *might*, one day, *be* remains a defining characteristic of the mimetic function of the real-life miniature replicas. While the dollhouses' gendered orientations and their status as symbols of affluence and power with time might have shifted, what has remained the same is how the structures are designed to entice its owner/ beholder

to play along, i.e., to maintain /foster/reproduce existing hegemonic structuring systems. Bermúdez-Silverman has (re)crafted a pedagogic tool that within a contemporary North American context is indicative of a site where children "prepare" themselves to attain cis-heteronormative capitalist ideals—the middle-class American dream of purchasing and maintaining a home inhabited by a nuclear family. The American dream the dollhouse becomes emblematic of is best encapsulated by the way Toni Morrison once described. "The American dream is innocence and clean slates and the future" (quoted in Gordon, 184) — a forward looking dream/aspiration of social reproduction that in practice invisibilizes the scaffolding, i.e., the structures of support that have historically sustained such aspirational longings.

Dollhouses, and the dolls that inhabit them, are small-scale objects that give insight into the performance of childhood ubiquitously marketed, like the American dream, as innocent and, therefore, in need of guidance and protection. The binary distinction between childhood and adulthood as Toby Rollo (2018) argues is essential to more fully understanding modern day racializing projects. Rollo sets out to support the claim that Black people become objects of violence "because Blackness has been identified with childhood and childhood is historically identified as the archetypal site of naturalized violence and servitude" (307). Innocence, as Rollo argues is fraught with contradictions that are rather "reflective of a popular but erroneous mythos of protective childhood innocence," because of the way specific notions of innocence "(e.g., epistemic, carnal, legal)" are conflated (318). As Rollo further writes:

> Most accounts of protected childhood tend to confuse these distinct ideas of innocence, which is significant because very few ideals of innocence are, in fact, protective. The attribution of epistemic innocence (i.e., the lack of worldly experience and knowledge) was, for instance, a pretense for the colonial assimilation of

> Indigenous youth via forced attendance in genocidal residential school systems. Likewise, the cultural esthetic of sexual innocence, cultivated during the Romantic and Victorian periods by artists and intellectuals, was often rooted in the erotic fetishization of youthful purity and its corollary provocations to both protect and violate. Like Christian sins of sexual vice and promiscuity, the ideal of childhood innocence constituted an objectification of youth sexuality (an expression of misopedy that also informs misogyny). (318)

Notions of childhood innocence, in other words, have been/can be strategically deployed to justify acts of violence.[7]

Synonyms of the word innocent in the Merriam Webster dictionary today include words like pure, moral, honest, righteous, unblemished, virgin, white, revealing the cultural, religious, sexual, and racial connotations attributed to those deemed worthy of or forced into such categorization. Political uses of childhood innocence in the cultivation of a racial order have been comprehensively explored by Robin Bernstein (2011). Bernstein, for example, interrogates constructs of American innocence by examining how childhood enactments don't necessarily gesture towards "clean slated futures." Bernstein rather argues that the performance of childhood is central to racial projects as she rigorously examines how notions of childhood innocence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America provided "deep cover" for "the construction and maintenance of whiteness" (7–8). The construction and maintenance of whiteness, in relation to the dollhouses, is also gendered as feminine and hence, under its binary logics, associated with the reproduction of such constructions.

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[7] Rollo further points out that childhood does not necessarily connote a site of refuge or protection, despite depictions of "blissful and bucolic childhood found in art and literature" (321). He also notes that "By the 1970s, although almost every developed nation-state had abolished corporal punishment in prisons, declaring that the practice was dehumanizing and had no merit as a corrective, virtually all of these jurisdictions preserved legal sanctions allowing parental and educational violence against children" (321).

Bernstein takes as her object of analysis the way children played with their black dolls and elucidates how they were manufactured as servant figures in high-end dollhouses and deployed in elaborate slavery games–-serving, being beaten, and broken by their owners. The ability of the dolls to elicit such behavior leads Bernstein to define such objects of play as "scriptive things," described as "an item of material culture that prompts meaningful bodily behaviors" (71). Bernstein clarifies that a "scriptive thing" does not overly determine behavior, it is rather an object that is both prescribed and improvisational. Scripts, for example, "deeply influence" a performance, yet "they do not entirely determine live performances, which vary according to agential individuals' visions, impulses, resistances, revisions, and management of unexpected disruptions" (71). While Bernstein recognizes that dominant culture interpellates children, the performance of childhood is, as she further explores, a complex process that "occurs through surrogation, which Joseph R. Roach defines as the process by which 'culture reproduces and re-creates itself'" (22). The dolls, in the context of 19th and 20th century America, were "scriptive things" that reveal the way young children, of certain privileged backgrounds, enacted terrorizing fantasies that reflect how hegemonies maintain and reproduce a racial order through violence, and how such (re)enactments in turn naturalize/establish/settle the structuring systems of the hegemony. If dollhouses traditionally have provided a stage for mimicking/rehearsing a hegemony's reproductive strategy, then by attributing an unsettling aesthetic to her sugary creations, Bermúdez-Silverman (re)crafts a "scriptive thing" to expose and shatter the myth of innocence that refines and sweetens how violent hegemonic acts propagate themselves. By unsettling the seductive sweetness of dominant fantasies, the artist opens a site for sensing/tasting/enacting alternative aspirations/imaginings.

THE ZOMBIES UNSETTLING/HAUNTING THE DOLLHOUSE MADE OF SUGAR

Placed amongst the other works in a dimly lit area of the gallery and illuminated from below, the dollhouses–that appeared in pastel colors of pink, and white, and coca cola brown–emanated with a seductive cotton candy glow. Pastel colors are distinguished by "the amount of white mixed into them to take away the saturation and turn them into a pale version of colors" (offeo). Their lack of saturation or intensity is perhaps what gives pastel colors their calming or innocent or apathetic allure, i.e., pastel colors are not normatively associated with things or experiences considered unsettling. While the dollhouses might at first appear like "innocent" cotton-candy replicas of childhood playthings, the onset of the sugar's structural decay, the remnants of the living that decorate the structures, and their glowing illumination from below animate each of the miniature candied homes with a "ghostly/haunting" aura. Animacy, as described by Mel Y. Chen (2012) "is a craft of the senses; it endows our surroundings with life, death, and things in between" (55). The notion of in-betweenness, central conceptually to the artist's oeuvre, is also part of the "ghostly" feeling evoked by the haunted house trope Bermúdez-Silverman deploys in her dollhouse series. The dollhouses feel "alive" because of the way the "dead" are sensed/felt and hence affect/agitate/animate the environment the "living" inhabit. The artist who has (re)crafted a childhood construct, draws the beholder to a liminal site where dead matter(s) produce an animating/ enlivening affect that unsettle the familiar, innocent, and sweet attributes associated with pastel colors, dollhouses, and sugar.

Avery Gordon (1997) delves into the phenomena of the ghostly as haunting signifiers of what is or has been missing and *must* be examined. Haunting, as Gordon explicates "describes that which appears to be not there" but "is often a *seething presence*, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities," (8, emphasis mine). Ghostly matters haunt present subjects by tying them to the past. "To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social

effects (190).” “The ghost” however, “is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). In other words, the recognition of the ghostly is a means of action for (re)examining what has been ignored or erased—an erasure that enables modern systems of abusive power to maintain their hegemonic grip but that also produce the conditions that haunt. Ghostly matters, therefore, materialize as sensual knowledge that prompts us to “stop fleeing from the recognition of something more” (206). Gordon also claims that the recognition of the ghostly “imports a charged strangeness into the space or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone or activity of knowledge” (63). The crafting of an unsettling aesthetic, in Bermúdez-Silverman’s dollhouse series, makes strange the architectures that condition taken-for-granted realities providing the beholder with the possibility to sense what might lie beyond “the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone or activity of knowledge.”

Describing the sentiment the dollhouses series evokes, the reviewer Allison Conner (2021) noted how they feel like “uncanny props from forgotten movies.” I explore the uncanny/strange sensation experienced by Conner, but focusing on the dollhouse the artist decorated with stills from the 1932 film *White Zombie* — a dollhouse animated and haunted by the representation of the “thing in between” the living and the dead; the original zombie of the “new world.” As the artist relays:

> The film is sort of the first zombie feature that introduced white Americans to the zombie myth. The zombie myth originated in Haiti as a metaphor for the African slaves who worked on sugar plantations. They basically are stuck between the physical world and the afterlife. But now the American zombie is completely devoid of that history. So, that house, *White Zombie*, is filled with transparencies of stills from that movie. (Agustsson)

The *White Zombie* dollhouse centers a particular myth/history, forgotten/subsumed/whitened by American culture, that is directly tied to a material practice dependent on compelled servitude and the harvesting of sugar cane.

In the film, inspired by William Seabrook's 1929 book, The Magic Island — a first person "journalistic" account of Haitian Vodou practices written for American audiences— an archetypal blonde female from New York named Madeline Short arrives in Haiti to marry her fiancé Neil Parker, a white U.S. bank employee based in Port-au-Prince. While traveling, she meets a wealthy plantation owner by the name of Charles Beaumont who falls for her and develops a plot to cast her under an evil spell to make her his own by turning her into a "white" zombie. Beaumont turns to a Vodou master menacingly named Murder Legendre played by Bela Lugosi best remembered for his role as Count Dracula, to carry out the spell. Murder Legendre gets his name as he has turned an army of "undead" Haitian men into zombies to work his sugar mill grinder for his own great personal profit. In the film, Neil is the hero/ protagonist, Madeline, his damsel in distress, and the European presenting Beaumont and Legendre the decadent villains.[8]

The Haitian zombies in the film are stereotypically representative of slaves and slavery. They walk by shuffling their feet as if still in shackles and are accompanied by a projection of racial tropes that depict the black(ened) slave, as a mindless figure that, lacking willpower, must always be led—a trope that Kamia Glover (2017) writes brings to light "a long-standing equivalence between blackness, materiality, and alterity: that is, the black body as irretrievably and mindlessly needful other" (236). Opening with the nighttime scene of a Haitian burial, accompanied by the atmospheric sounds of drumming and chanting, the film

[8] Gary Don Rhodes explains that early American horror movies drew from the xenophobia that developed during the 1920s as blame was attributed to Europeans for the U.S.'s involvement in World War I and the Great Depression. Rhodes notes that "If perceived villains in real life were foreigners," so were those in the horror films of the 1930s, which placed Americans in Europe or other unfamiliar locations to confront trouble outside the U.S. (Rhodes 2001).

immediately situates Vodou, zombies, and Murder Legendre, the local "witch doctor," as threats to the white American visitors—[9] depictions that have been integral in cultivating the "demonizing" tastes attributed to the "dark/black" arts of Haiti (Recker 2018).

The zombie archetype from which *White Zombie* draws its inspiration, originated from a belief system adapted by enslaved Africans who were confronted daily with the unbearable reality that they were being worked to death on French-owned sugar plantations in what colonizers came to call *Saint Domingue*.[10] According to Amy Wilentz (2011),

> One of the first things the Haitian slaves learned in circumstances of total dependence on the slave master was how to use poison for suicide. If you died, in Haitian belief, you returned to *lan guinee*... and to freedom. [11] (You also stole a valuable piece of property (yourself), from your master, so that suicide was an act of defiant thievery). Death was better than slavery for many – the suicide rate among Haitian slaves was very high... Worse would be to die and discover that, rather than returning to Africa, you continued to be enslaved as a dead person, run by a master, doing his bidding – and this is the fear that created the zombie.

The zombie, that existed in *Saint Domingue* from 1625 until the beginning of the nineteenth century, was a projection of the slaves' relentless subjugation under a system that rapidly consumed and replaced them. As Mike Mariani (2015) writes: "For Haitian slaves, the invention of the zombie was proof that the abuse they suffered was in a way more powerful than life itself—they had imagined a scenario in which they continued to be slaves even after

[9] Laurel Recker (2018) notes in her article, "Promotion for White Zombie in the US leaned heavily on this connection while also sensationalizing the supposed savagery of Black Haitians. Ad copy promised that the film's depiction of corpses "dug from their graves and put to work as slaves" was based on factual observations by American researchers. Promoters encouraged local exhibitors to hire Black performers to dress in "tropical garments," beat tom toms, and yell" (Recker 2018).
[10] The word zombie came into English by way of Haiti, where it arrived from Africa along with the island's population of enslaved peoples. See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (2012) "Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology)" p. 9
[11] The Vodou name for Africa

death." In a system dependent on working racialized bodies to the grave, perhaps the horror of zombification, i.e., the horror of never-ending servitude, could also be understood as a condition likely inherited by descendants who followed.

This notion of inheritance is made evident not only by incorporating the story of those condemned to a never-ending life sentence producing sugar for global consumption, but by Bermúdez-Silverman's choice to construct mini replicas of homes made from sugar. The materiality of the structures acts as a metaphor for a way of living made possible by the bounty yielded and *inherited* from what Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) calls the "colonial architectures that allowed the expropriation of the total value produced by native lands and slave labor" (94). As da Silva argues that bounty debunks the myth of "primitive" capital, that occludes "how the total (past, present, and future) value expropriated is in the very structures (in blood and flesh) of global capital" (83,84). In other words, global capital is framed, i.e., supported, and shaped, by the productive capacity of the "blood and flesh" of the original living dead—that inexhaustible racialized labor force that is always generating wealth at the expense of itself.

Wilentz further points out how after the revolution in 1804, as Haiti's precarious sovereignty as a Black nation continued to be challenged by socio-economic and political forces both domestically and abroad, "the fear of zombification, which is in its historical context the fear of re-enslavement, persisted. No one wanted to be dead, consciousness-less, and working for free for a master." Unlike the reality of an economic system dependent on slavery that was always tasked with suppressing revolts, escapes, or suicides, zombies represent a lack of agency, will, or desire. Zombies are robots of the flesh controlled entirely by outside forces to profit those who have mastered control. Kamaia Glover (2011) writes of the significance of the zombie in Haitian literature with the following: "Indeed, the creature has often served as an aesthetic premise for the expression of a specifically Haitian

philosophical perspective…the concept of zombification effectively places the Marxist theory of alienation—victimization at the hands of an exploitative external agent—in a specifically Haitian context" (58).

In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's essay "Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology)," he notes that zombies "are nothing but their bodies" (400). In the context of the Haitian belief system once rendered dead/ mindless, what remains, the body, becomes an object of utility. The ontology of objecthood—now, perhaps, generally understood as the scholarly inquiry of "new" materialism and its offspring object-oriented ontology (ooo) which Cohen cites for his analysis—has for decades been a central inquiry of Black Studies scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten to name a few. As Zakiyyah Jackson (2011), after Wynter posits, what happens when we consider blackness not as a sociological experience but rather as structural, as an ontology that illuminates a condition of "existential negation" which Jackson later defines "as the condition of — commodification, depersonalization, fungibility, and ontological negation." The "existential negation" Jackson is describing is how as Cohen further writes the zombie becomes "a beast of burden that his master exploits without mercy, making him work in the fields… whipping him freely and feeding him on meager, tasteless food…Zombies are human beings against whom the most horrendous violence may be ethically perpetrated…the perfect monster for guilt-free slaughter" (403). The waking nightmare of a zombie existence is that once stripped of personhood i.e., made mindless and desireless by nefarious forces, the zombie then labors tirelessly, presumably, without any material wants and or complaints. Glover (2011) poignantly notes, "Without any recollection of its past or hope for the future, the zombie exists only in the present of its exploitation" (59). Thinking structurally, the Haitian zombie divulges how sugar's (re)production in the "new world" was from its inception dependent on inflicting horror inducing racial violence to produce a bodily force amenable to working as if

inexhaustible—a force designed to forever yield the bounty that supports the racializing structure.

Zombies were/are not only projections they also manifested/manifest in real life marking them as figures that are both allegorical and historical.[12] The post-colonial zombie was further incorporated into the Vodou religion with Haitians believing zombies were corpses reanimated by shamans and Vodou priests. As Glover further explains the zombie is "a thingified non-person reduced to its productive capacity. A partially resuscitated corpse that has been extracted from the tomb by an evil sorcerer (a bokor or houngan) and then maintained indefinitely" (59). The *bokor* in *White Zombie*, the European presenting Murder Legendre— a figurative symbol of the plantation economy—zombifies an army of workers in the 1900's to carry out his every wish and command. In one of their nefarious business exchanges, Legendre offers Beaumont a supply of laborers by explaining their inexhaustible ability to work. "They are not worried about long hours. You could make good use of men like mine on your plantation." While the film does not address this fact directly, *White Zombie* takes place during the final years of the U.S.'s occupation mission in Haiti.[13] Far

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[12] In the opening scenes of *White Zombie*, shortly before Madeline and Neil meet Legendre and his zombie entourage, they witness a Vodou burial which will prevent the body of the dead from being dug out, and mindlessly animated back to life by sorcery. While the film represents a fictional account of such burial rituals, such practices occur until today in Haiti. Many people in Haiti believe that zombies are very real, as Zora Neal Hurston, who four years after *White Zombie* premiered, witnessed for herself. Charles King writes in *Gods of the Upper Air* (2019) Hurston recalled that "in Haiti, talk of zombies 'seeps over the country like a ground current of cold air.' She encountered zombie legends nearly everywhere she visited, from Port-au-Prince to Arcahaie and beyond." Hurston took an anthropological journey to Haiti in 1936, where she immersed herself in the culture, including the practice and documentation of the religion of Vodou. During her research trip she met and photographed a woman by the name of Felicia Felix-Mentor that medical records showed had died in 1907. Months before Hurston's visit, and 29 years after her recorded death, gendarmes had encountered a woman walking naked along a rural road. Her remaining family confirmed it was Felix-Mentor. Shortly after this incident authorities committed her to mental ward facility. As King writes "Doctors at the hospital told Hurston that Felix-Mentor was likely the victim of poisoning. A practitioner of dark magic, a bocor, might have given her a drug that simulated death, concocted from a secret formula passed down from priest to priest" (284-286). Hurston eventually wrote an ethnography about such experiences in a book called *Tell My Horse*, first published in 1938. Towards the conclusion she writes "What is the whole truth and nothing else but the truth about Zombies? I do not know, but I know that I saw the relic, or refuse of Felicia Felix-Mentor in a hospital ward" (179).

[13] Haiti was under U.S. occupation from 1915-34.

from making any unfavorable political statements about the legacy of slavery and/or the horrific and patronizing manner that the U.S. occupation had unfolded, black zombie slavery in the film inadvertently represents a macabre version of the *corvée* system which the U.S. had been inflicting on the Haitian population since their arrival as occupiers/masters in 1915.[14] A uniquely "new world" creation born out of a monstrous modernity, the zombie simultaneously evokes the U.S. capitalist occupation in the beginning of the 20th century and the French colonization of Haiti in the 17th.

During the U.S. occupation, American control included a strict anti-Vodou policy that authorized raids on religious compounds and ceremonies, and the confiscation of religious artifacts. As Laurel Recker (2018) writes:

> Within this context of systematic oppression, Seabrook elaborated the concept of zombie in his 1929 sensationalist travelogue, *The Magic Island*. The book's popularity and the ensuing production of *White Zombie* quickly propelled the zombie into the popular imagination as a manifestation of Vodou's irrational and subversive powers. The image of the zombie reinforced popular imagery in the American media that sensationalized Vodou as a violent and promiscuous practice.

Such American translations further cultivated a taste for Haiti that reinforced negative connotations of Vodou propagated in Europe and the United States following the Haitian Revolution, while also justifying Haiti's occupation by American forces in the 20th century (Murphy 2011). Rather than depicting the threat of zombies, who, in the film, only

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[14] According to Laurel Recker (2018) "Further, their working location, a Haitian sugar mill outside of Port-au-Prince, directly references the fields of the American-owned Haitian American Sugar Company (HASCO). According to Seabrook's account, the US occupation instigates the emergence of Haitian zombies, who are said to originate in the HASCO fields. …It is twentieth-century American "big business" and its complimentary military occupation that cultivate the emergence of zombie slaves. Such zombies bind the image of the exploited HASCO worker to that of the Saint-Domingue slave, both of whom work the same fields for colonial sugar interests backed by military occupations."

serve/perform their master's bidding, *White Zombie* instead represents the threat of white American contagion and enslavement. As Recker further argues: "When Legendre uses Vodou to enslave and zombify Madeline (at Beaumont's request), her possession overturns the US occupation's status quo; Madeline's enslavement signals the vulnerability of the American forces in Haiti, of their "property," and of their "moral" imperative." By the film's end Madeline is freed with the deaths of Murder Legendre and his zombies.
Vodou, depicted as a black subversive force, had to be demonized to be neutralized by "benevolent" American forces to stop its potential contagion/spread.[15] Ultimately the historical and allegorical Haitian zombie is reflective of a material reality crafted from the specific violence's and terrors of the founding of capitalist modernity and black (re)enslavement.

The folkloric origins of the Haitian zombie for the most part, as noted by Bermúdez-Silverman, faced further dilution in the States after the premier of the film.[16] The suffering inflicted upon the countless (re)enslaved and worked to their graves on sugar plantations before and after the Haitian Revolution, and the fear that such systems would never cease from existing, bears little resemblance to the zombies that have become iconic in American culture today.[17] While the zombie is perhaps now considered an "unraced" figure of popular culture, the zombie remains as Glover (2017) argues, "an inherently racialized assemblage

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[15] Such persisting depictions of Haiti as Kieren Murphy (2011) argues, have hindered the adequate scholarly attention zombies should attract, as zombies have been considered "a phantasm inspired by an anthropological curiosity that contributed to Haiti's bad press through its sensationalist evocations in travel literature and horror film." However, "by attributing its popularity abroad solely to sensationalism, such association also neutralizes the significance of the zombie as an influential and remarkable Haitian invention" (Murphy 47).
[16] Except for the 1988 film *The Serpent and the Rainbow* directed by Wes Craven and starring Bill Pullman which was based on the controversial non-fiction book of the same name by ethnobotanist Wade Davis. In the book Davis recounts his experiences in Haiti investigating the story of a man, who was allegedly poisoned, buried alive, and revived with a concoction that produced what was called a zombie. See Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.
[17] The zombie, in an American context is one popularized by the film written by George A. Romero and John A. Russo, *Night of the Living Dead (*1968), which represents zombies as reanimated human corpses that eat the flesh and/or brains of the living.

that functions generatively vis-à-vis the phenomenon of Afro-alterity ” (251). In the U.S., zombies, like sugar, while originally created from the application of anti-black ideologies/technologies, appear like just another (re)source of/for easy/mindless consumption. By decorating one of the dollhouses made of sugar with stills from *White Zombie*, Bermúdez-Silverman, however, illuminates the cracks in the colonial architecture that haunt a political economy/ontology grounded, refined, and unsettled by the "zombification" of black(end) bodies.

Responding to a question about the themes that animate her art making Bermúdez-Silverman in an interview once discussed how she attempts to make visible that which appears invisible in a manner reminiscent to Gordon's claims about ghostly matters.

> I'm interested in material history and the history of objects, as well. But I'm also interested in systems of power—the gendered, racial, and economic systems of power that are sometimes invisible—and the ways in which they shape our environment and pretty much everything we do. The core of my work is about exposing systems of power that sometimes aren't seen. (Ologundudu)

By putting stills from the 1932 "whitened" depiction of the zombie, i.e., the trope of the (re)enslaved as a black subversive force that has been neutralized to work without respite, inside an aspirational construct meant to evoke sweetness, and "innocence and clean slates and the future," the artist makes visible the under-recognized monstrous histories tied to the standardization of racial capitalism and the (re)production and consumption of sugar. Sugar the "sweet" commodity of "new world" slavery, is a compelling artistic material/subject to construct dollhouses because it draws attention to how the pleasure/ prosperity yielded from the production of sugar, its sweet bounty, was/is dependent on sugarcoating anti-black technologies that enable its (re)production/construction. The candied ideal reveals how a "taken-for-granted" abusive system of power maintains its sweet allure by reproducing

"whitened" depictions of a racialized labor force that neutralizes the unsettling threat of subversion.

If the production of sugar is what initiates the folkloric origins of the zombie, however, then by illuminating the candied ideals from below the artists is not only "exposing systems of power that sometimes aren't seen," but reorienting our senses to the "seething presence" that emanates from their foundations (Gordon 1997). The candied ideal—a construction that before the eyes of the beholder is beginning to deteriorate—elucidates its "haunted" condition, its structural instability, and its impending demise. In this sense, the glowing affect of the pastel-colored dollhouses—that are beginning to cloud and crack and sag— produces a state of sensorial disorder. It is not the construction in front of the eye-level of the beholder but what lies beneath the dollhouses that is illuminated—a gesture that momentarily collapses the walls of containment, as the light emanates beyond the structure sensorially orienting us to the foundations that have cultivated the taste of sweetness while bringing to light what Sylvia Wynter coins the "demonic grounds" from which they spring.

In her articulations and theorizations Wynter deploys the term "demonic grounds," to describe the perceptual and onto-epistemological foundations upon which the modern Western world built a hierarchy of being/mattering deemed universal. Grounded/founded by the concept of the "other" the "demonic ground" is also a site that under its fixed codes is unknowable/incomprehensible. As Justine M. Bakker (2022) writes: "Demonic ground" is the liminal space that is opened up by the persistent but ultimately always futile desire for pure and absolute difference." Wynter introduces the term in her essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" As a student and scholar of Wynter, Carmen Kynard (2012) elucidates the origins of the religious resonating term that "is based on theories of math and physics where a system that is in place is called demonic when it does not have an already determined or knowable outcome." Wynter coins

the term initially to represent the "absent presence" of Black women by reading against the grain of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As Kynard explains: "Instead of focusing on Caliban's mother, as Aime Cesaire did, Wynter focuses on Caliban's female peer, "the woman of his kind" — a woman who is so "outside of the bounds of Prospero's world of reason that she cannot even be imagined, and so appears nowhere in the play.'" Wynter (1990) densely first articulates the term as follows:

> I want to argue in this After/Word, *from its projected "demonic ground" outside of our present governing system of meaning, or theory/ontology in [A.T.] de Nicolas' sense of the word* that is precisely the variable 'race' which imposes upon these essays the contradictory dualism by which the writers both work within the "regime of truth" of the discourse of feminism, at the same time as they make use of this still essentially Western discourse to point towards the epochal threshold of a new post-modern and post-Western mode of cognitive inquiry; one which goes beyond the limits of our present "human sciences," to constitute itself as a new science of human life. (356)

The demonic ground that Wynter is beginning to articulate and write from is a space not imagined and thereby, radical, in that it can unsettle the binary governing codes of a social order which is presented as the only option rather than merely one option amongst many. As McKittrick writes "Sylvia Wynter's work entails not only "deconstructing" or denaturalizing categories such as "race"; it also means envisioning what is beyond the hierarchical codes and partial human stories that have, for so long, organized our populations and the planet" (135). Unsettling a prescribed and regimented order of being imagined from the demonic ground, as Wynter argues, brings the possibility of a "human discourse" that goes "beyond the 'master discourse' governing 'privileged text', and its sub/versions.'" (Quoted in Kynard) —providing, therefore, an alternative sense of humanity not dependent on reproducing essentializing/racializing/ subjugating tastes and practices.

Bermúdez-Silverman's dollhouse (re)crafted from sugar and inhabited by the undead does not induce a feeling of sweet aspiration that entices one to play along in refining/reproducing the taste of/for hegemonic structures, i.e., the aesthetic/political/ontological ideal of whiteness. The dollhouse, a "scriptive thing" made of sugar, rather engages the viewer to enact a different kind of tasting/imagining. The dollhouses made of sugar disrupt the seduction of fabricated sweetness, by exposing how aspirational ideals have been founded and framed by deadening racializing practices. The candied dollhouses also orient the beholder to the demonic grounds, a foundational site that cannot be understood/known under current Western imperial/colonial epistemological/aesthetic models, but that can be felt/sensed. Demonic grounds using Gordons phrasing "unsettle the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone or activity of knowledge." The *White Zombie* dollhouse not only entices its beholder to consider how and why the zombie—a horror inducing black(ened) symbol of never-ending servitude—(re)appears and haunts the "sweet" dreams/constructs to which too many of us still aspire, the dollhouse also illuminates sense-abilities that exceed our epistemological/aesthetic constraints. The dollhouse, therefore, acts as a "scriptive thing" that enables its beholder to sense the existence of alternative perceptual and onto-epistemological orientations and to rehearse/enact imaginings/aspirations/tastings that always already exist outside the confines of decaying colonial architectures.

CONVICT LEASING AND THE BONES WHITENING/HAUNTING SUGAR LAND

If Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's dollhouses made of sugar orient us to what symbolically grounds, refines, and unsettles capitalist constructs/ideals inherited from colonial architectures, then the bones unearthed in Sugar Land, Texas gesture towards material remains that have grounded, refined, and unsettled such constructs and ideals. As Bermúdez-Silverman was beginning to conceptualize her dollhouse series, the remains of 95

inmates of African descent who were worked to their early graves harvesting cane, had recently been unearthed. In February of 2018, a story based on compelled servitude and sugar was making itself known (again) with news of the findings spreading locally at first and subsequently on national and international media outlets and platforms (Dart).

Former Sugar Land resident and urban planning and development scholar Andrea Roberts (2020) in her article "Haunting as Agency: A Critical Cultural Landscape Approach to Making Black Labor Visible in Sugar Land, Texas" examines the city's racial landscapes by interrogating the way the city dealt with the findings of the Sugar Land 95. Roberts deploys Avery Gordon's (1997) theorizations on ghostly matters and articulates the notion of haunting in relation to the remains unearthed in Sugar Land. Quoting Gordon, Roberts selects the following passages: "Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (such as with transatlantic slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is continuously denied (such as with free labor or national security)" (212). Haunting is a state in which a phenomenon, a memory, or a ghost "prompts something to be done" (212). Haunting, as Roberts further theorizes in relation to the Sugar Land 95, could also be understood as an affective agential force that disrupts/unsettles how Sugar Land markets itself as a place where "the sweet life" is possible. As Roberts argues the unearthing rather makes evident a cultural landscape that has invisibilized how that sweet life was and is constructed, maintained, and preserved. "In Sugar Land's landscape of plantations, prison farms, refinery complex, worker "Quarters" original purposes—racial violence and bondage––exploited Black laboring bodies have been purposefully forgotten" (211). As I argue throughout this section, that "purposeful forgetting" could be thought as a form of whitewashing that sweetens, i.e., makes palatable racialized orientations in the city that it

then promotes as an idealized way of living. Yet the material remains, the bones of those who produced the sweet bounty of the region, inevitably resurfaced to unsettle such orientations.

CONVICT LEASING IN SUGAR LAND

Sugar Land is named after the crop that created the conditions of "sweet living," i.e., the prosperity originally yielded from the production of sugar cane that the town uses to market itself today. While cotton, during the U.S.'s history of slavery, was the predominant crop in many southern states, in the lower half of Texas, between the Brazos and Colorado rivers, the region's fertile soil was well suited for sugar cultivation (Hardy, Hite). Sugar was highly profitable yet required a great deal of labor and sugar plantations in Texas became highly profitable because of their increasing reliance on slave labor.[18] As Murder Legendre suggests in *White Zombie,* the labor required to work sugar had to be amenable to working long hours. Sugar harvesting was even more arduous than picking cotton, as slaves worked nonstop during harvest season to cut the sugarcane, press out the cane juice, boil it down, and then pack the finished product onto trains to be shipped around the country. As Michael Tadman (2000) argues "sugar planting systematically brought together a lethal combination of factors that persistently and almost inevitably produced natural decrease among slaves" (1536). He goes on to quote R. W. Harris and other expert witnesses who testified to the U.S. Treasury in 1846, "The cultivation of sugar requires more indefatigable labor than any other production ... not a moment must be lost; [it] requir[es], also, about seventy days' labor of eighteen hours each, during the boiling season" (1548). In addition to ceaseless working hours many who worked in the wet sugar cane fields "fell victim to the periodic epidemics of fevers" (Bell 2004). The historian Sean Kelley asserts that, "sugar work was about as bad as

[18] Sugar Land originally consisted of more than 97,000 acres that Mexico's government granted to Stephen F. Austin in 1823. "With Austin's help, some 300 American families soon settled there. The first sugar plantations began operating in the 1830s, and by the 1850s the area would be an integral part of what became known as the Sugar Bowl of Texas." During those years, slaves of African descent brought by Austin and the settling families produced the sugar that gave the region its name (Pruitt, 2018).

you can imagine. People got sick, they died. Women's fertility rates plummeted. Europeans quickly discovered that you couldn't get people to work in this voluntarily, which is why there's a strong historical linkage between sugar and slavery" (Quoted in Hardy).

Abolition, at first, almost crushed the industry but the convict leasing system, as Donald Walker in *Penology for Profit: A History of the Texas Prison System*, 1867-1912 (1988) explores, revived it and beginning in Sugar Land a series of large Texas prison farms began populating the lower Brazos River.[19] Convict leasing, which was legally permitted from 1866-1908, proved a lucrative practice in Texas for the state and private contractors who profited as prisoners earned no pay while facing dangerous/ deadly working conditions. Katherine Hite (2022) writes: "Those who profited included the prison officers, the police, the judges, the justices of the peace, the prosecutors, and of course the employers themselves" (17). An entire ecosystem of profiteers enabled a practice that when a leased inmate died in the fields, managers who had contracted with the prison system for a certain number of bodies would simply demand a replacement. As Mathew Mancini (1996) claims in *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* convict leasing is, therefore, "one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history." The journalist Brent Staples (2018) opines that convict leasing can "be seen as more pernicious than slavery" as "slave masters had at least a nominal interest in keeping alive people whom they owned and in whom they held an economic stake." In other words, the criminalized, were replaceable as well as exploitable, in contradistinction to the enslaved who were also vested property. The long-term durability of a worker was not a prerequisite when there appeared to be an endless supply of convict labor more monetarily advantages than slavery.

[19] Edward H Cunningham and Littleberry A Ellis, business partners who served in the civil war on the Confederate side, became the biggest contributors to the convict leasing system when they signed a contract in 1878 to lease Texas's entire prison population (Jenkins 2019).

That labor supply was, not incidentally, made possible by the increasing incarceration of those who were formerly legally enslaved (Hite). Prior to the Civil War, as Hite (2022) interrogates, there were few incarcerated men in Texas, and those incarcerated were overwhelmingly white. "Post-Emancipation, white officials' consistent use of Black Codes, vagrancy laws, and debt peonage filled Texas and neighboring southern state prisons over capacity, and by 1868, most incarcerated men were of African descent. Black people made up 50 to 60 percent of prison population during the convict leasing period 1871-1911" (Hite, 4). According to a report commissioned by the municipality for the Sugar Land 95, that documents the findings of forensic anthropologists and archeologists and contextualizes the history of convict leasing in the region, "Anglo convicts were sent to wood cutting camps of East Texas and Hispanic convicts were sent to work on the railroad. Black convicts were sent to cultivate crops – primarily cotton and sugar cane. Often on the same plantation from which they were freed only six years prior" (SL 95 Report, 3).

The determination of who worked where was informed by the classification of racialized bodies that reified the black laboring body, as *the* body most "fit" for working sugar cane and for inhabiting "living" conditions that secured a rapid demise. As Michael Hardy (2017) writes the conditions in these labor camps were not life sustaining. "Prisoners were often stuffed into cells so narrow and cramped that many were smothered to death. The beatings were frequent, and the mosquito-borne epidemics were rampant." In the Sugar Land 95 Executive Summary (2020), it stipulates that of those incarcerated at the Bullhead Convict Labor Camp:

> The median age of death among the identified convicts was 24. The youngest fatality was William Nash at 16, serving four years for theft. He died of "brain congestion," possibly from a traumatic brain injury. The most common causes of death were congestion of the brain/ bowels/organs, gunshot following attempted

> escape, pneumonia, and sun stroke... The median sentence length was five years. Yet, more than half of these Bullhead convicts died within a year of their arrival at the camp; 78% died within two years.

As Frederick Douglass (1855) once wrote, those enslaved and condemned to work sugar were destined for a "life of living death" (67). Achille Mbembe (2011) defines the living dead as those who are designated to populate 'death worlds', i.e., spaces with living conditions which allow one to barely survive—a condition Lauren Berlant (2007) would coin as a "slow death." Berlant defines this condition as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (754). In the forced labor camps surrounding Sugar Land, leased convicts, the living dead, fulfilled a never-ending deadening sentence of back breaking work to cultivate, harvest, and boil sugar cane.

The fear of re-enslavement, that haunted those who had experienced the horrors of the plantation economy, became a reality in several places in the U.S. that benefited from the convict leasing system put in place after Emancipation. The state was now able to provide an unlimited resource of bodies "zombified" within the penal colony and leased to work for the same masters from whom they had just been liberated. In other words, the "criminality" of the emancipated black body was "neutralized" through incarceration and compelled servitude. Once incarcerated the disproportionally black convicts were condemned to (re)live an existence, as a bodily object of utility, marked by a deadening labor practice on plantation farms where the option of escape and/or compliance most certainly meant a premature death.

Though repeatedly reiterated in literature surrounding convict leasing, men, were not the only ones condemned to forced labor camps. While Bermúdez-Silverman's art of crafting dollhouses made of sugar might gesture towards the under-recognized and under-valued labor of women, the bones of the female inmate unearthed in Sugar Land serves as material proof

of such erasures. Enslaved and incarcerated women have been an integral part of the productive capacity/ generative reproduction of agricultural products and capital, yet they remain a labor demographic that is consistently and persistently invisibilized (Morgan, Haley). As Sarah Haley (2016) argues, regardless of gender constructs, disenfranchised black people, of all ages, in the Jim Crow South were subjected to draconian laws where they could be imprisoned for minor offenses such as swearing, drinking, selling liquor, insubordination, vagrancy, being orphaned, and self-defense. Under the binary logics of white supremacy black women and "adultified" girls were put in opposition to white women, who were the only women who could fully inhabit this recognizable human category. Black women/girls were perceived as lascivious, grotesque, monstrous, physically strong, emotionally non-sentient and therefore able to withstand harsh conditions and punishment for their "criminal" tendencies. White women in contrast were perceived as lady like, frail, vulnerable, emotionally sentient, incapable of hard labor and always in need of protection. As agents of the state imagined and labeled black women outside of womanhood, forcing them to labor as "men" was natural, and their right to reject sex, unthinkable.

While Haley's analysis focuses on gender and violence within carceral regimes in the state of Georgia, the remains of the Sugar Land 95 in Texas which include a woman and a child, and documentary photos like *Juvenile convicts at work in the fields* (1903)– that depicts young children in front of a sugar cane field shackled and in carceral uniforms– throws into sharp relief how gender and age were not factors that dissuaded the convict leasing system from working racialized bodies to their early graves.[20] Such elisions rather

[20] One of the forensic archeologists tasked with identifying the remains of Sugar Land 95 relays: "So about two weeks into the excavation, we were getting more and more evidence through laboratory analysis that what we were seeing here were all adult individuals and evidence of overwork was becoming commonly identified from burial to burial. Catrina had been telling us about some of her observations, and she had aged one individual at 14 years old. I remember when I heard that it didn't quite register for a few hours, but I was back out in the cemetery block, and I started thinking about what that meant. So, we're on a forced labor camp that existed for over 30 years in this place. And

illuminate the binary logics that as Jackson (2020) has written show how “antiblackness constitutes and disrupts sex/gender constructs” (32), as well as the adult/child dichotomy (Rollo, 2018).

When a leased convict died, a shockingly frequent occurrence as noted above, there was not a burial service and as the remains of the Sugar Land 95 reveal, prisoners were often destined for unmarked graves. The journalist Morgan Jerkins (2019), based off interviews with local residents, writes “In Sugar Land, it’s said that if you listen closely, you can still hear the chains of the prisoners who toiled in the sugarcane fields rattling.” As noted by the forensic archeologists that descended onto Sugar Land, the bones unearthed at the former prison camp cemetery were buried with the shackles and chains that made the work they were tasked with performing that much more life threatening—even in death, they remained in iron-clad constraints. As Staples writes: “One burial that stands out is that of a man who died after having a leg amputated — a possible side effect of wearing shackles that dug into the skin, causing what inmates referred to as “shackle poison.” Signs of amputation also divulge how convicts frequently cut off their limbs to escape the unbearable, daily horrors inflicted to produce sugar (Blackmon, 92). These stories are indicative of the ghostly matters that haunt Sugar Land, eliciting empirical claims by residents who can “still hear the chains.” Such claims underscore Mel Y. Chen’s (2012) notion of animacy, as they challenge the rigid boundaries between animate and inanimate, encouraging a more expansive understanding of life and agency that encompasses a broader range of beings and phenomena that do things, i.e., have a material impact that illicit change.

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someone, the young age of 14, was subjected to that, and was killed by that forced labor experience. That individual — that child — was worked to death” (Quoted in Land, 2020).

THE BONES WHITENING/HAUNTING SUGAR LAND

For almost a century the story of how the Sugar Land 95 arrived at these unmarked graves was never publicly discussed, studied, and almost forgotten as new inhabitants, homes, schools, and multimillion-dollar retail centers were built on the same land (Hite, Roberts). The unearthing according to local reports "became a daily horror story. With each turn of soil, new human remains were uncovered and promptly reported by local news media. The number of bodies discovered grew weekly from an initial few dozen to the current estimate of at least 95" (The Society of Justice & Equality for The People of Sugar Land). The "horrific" unearthing of the bones, at the Fort Bend school district's construction site, however, did manage to disrupt development as usual. As Roberts writes "In Sugar Land, a Houston bedroom community, the 95 who lived and suffered through convict leasing trouble the everyday sublimity of suburban culture and development" (213). The remains managed to halt all construction on site until a decision was made on how and where the bones would be "laid to rest."

Several articles that accompanied the unearthing of the Sugar Land 95 discussed how throughout this process the town had repeatedly tried to "whitewash" the racial legacy of sugar in the region (Hite, Kim, Roberts). Whitewashing, understood colloquially as a deliberate attempt to conceal unpleasant facts about (someone or something), could be understood as a similar ideology/ technique deployed to whiten sugar by erasing all signs— like the "coloring matter" that must be filtered through bones— of its production to make it appear "innocent" and "sweet." Whitewashing, for example, could be a term that applies to the way the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation, that "inspires community pride by collecting, preserving, communicating, and celebrating the history of Sugar Land, Texas," relays that history. Established after the closing of the Imperial Refinery in 2003, the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation website, while positively representing a story of the city's dubious

founding, does not provide any information about the inextricable link between racial slavery and sugar cultivation in the region. The site, however, does briefly describe the atrocities of convict leasing with the following sentence: “The brutal working conditions caused *bitter* convicts to call Sugar Land the “Hell hole on the Brazos” (emphasis mine) (Sugar Land Heritage Foundation). The descriptive choice to place the adjective bitter in front of the word convict rather care-lessly describes but does not contextualize how many of those incarcerated for appearing black might have rightly felt embittered after being forced to participate in a labor practice that would almost certainly cause their untimely death.

Whitewashing also applies to the way town officials continuously tried to avoid any culpability for the atrocities that had taken place in what has now become one of the most attractive cities in America. Reginald Moore— who spent decades on a one-man campaign to force city officials to commemorate the convict-leasing system that flourished in the region— before his passing claimed “They’re trying to hide it. They’ve done everything they could to run me off, to keep me out of the cemetery. And they’re still fighting me.” Moore had briefly worked as a prison guard in the 1980s at a correctional facility that sat on what was once a part of the Ellis and Cunningham sugar cane plantations. Moore relayed that working those years at the prison “reminded me of a plantation, the way the guards treated the inmates. You could see and feel the oppression. Even before I learned the history, I felt it” (Hardy). The numerous charged debates and protests that occurred to get the Sugar Land 95 re-interred in the same place where they had been unearthed, is a testament to how city officials repeatedly attempted to deflect and delay the recognition and acknowledgement of a horror-filled bitter past.

Roberts (2020), who grew up in Sugar Land, in her article centers the way Mayfield Park and its residents have been whitewashed from the city’s history. Mayfield Park, formerly named the Quarters, was the residential area designated for those who were

incarcerated and leased by the state. "After convict leasing ended in 1912, paid workers transitioned into small homes that faced the refinery. Living and working space merged for these Black and Brown laborers. Even within the last ten years, the City zoned homes in Mayfield Park as industrial rather than single-family, indicating how much the refinery and convict leasing defined the landscape areas" (214). The Sugar Land Heritage Foundation, which is funded in part by local developers, also provides public tours and according to Roberts "Mayfield Park is conspicuously absent from these tours" (230). As Roberts further suggests: "The local heritage society can make a difference by broadening the conversation about preservation to be inclusive of the area encompassing the original plantation and work camps along with Mayfield Park. The resulting district, if correctly interpreted would provide a fantastic example of American labor history spanning nearly two centuries" (241). Roberts notes, however, how the descendants of Imperial Sugar Refinery workers were ignored during the public engagement around the transition of the refinery to upscale housing in 2011-2015 (214). "What remains of the sugar refinery complex is adaptively reused and has been converted into an inviting mixed-use space for newcomers" (240). While Mayfield Park is a historic neighborhood in a town incorporated by a company, its exclusion from the designated historic district (which includes the Imperial refinery) and the lack of engagement of residents of Mayfield Park from city planning, deliberations, and development meetings is indictive of how whiteness and property share a common premise–the right to exclude through willful erasure.

The racial legacy of Sugar Land, though repeatedly "whitewashed," is hauntingly evident throughout the city. As Hardy writes a sculpture of Stephen F. Austin — "the father of Texas" who brought settlers to stolen land and slavery to the region sits "on horseback, clutching a rifle, and standing guard in front of city hall." Another plaque commemorating Anglo settlement of Texas—valorized locally as the Old 300—stands in

front of the Imperial Sugar Refinery. Most prominently on display might be the names of the city's "master-planned" communities that show how Sugar Land continues to romanticize/sweeten its racialized past. Roberts, for example, writes how:

> Subdivision and street names in Sugar Land are nostalgic holdovers from the area's Antebellum past…Sienna Plantation, New Territory, Settlers Way, Colony Bend, Sugar Creek, Oyster Creek Plantation, and Lexington Settlement are names of subdivisions constructed on former plantation land and prison camps. With these names, developers and City governments create an identity for Sugar Land that simultaneously hides and conspicuously displays its exploitive pre- and post-antebellum foundations through advertising, marketing, and signage. These names are part of Sugar Land's perverse ability to emphasize its sweetness, to keep the scaffolding of silence erect, and embrace a guiltless mythic past. (222)

–a mythic past now largely inhabited by residents that have no direct ties to that history.

What does it mean to find agreeable, and attain, and live, and causally walk through and amongst developments, settlements, and monuments named after murderous colonial ambitions and the "peculiar" institution of slavery? And what role do their inhabitants wittingly or unwittingly perform? And does that "consciousness" even matter? Like Bermúdez-Silverman's sweet replicas that are positioned in a manner that resemble the plan and layout of a master planned community, such sites could be thought of as a stage/site where "living the sweet life" is not only rehearsed but enacted. The master planned community developments "sweetly" named after plantations could be thought of as "scriptive things" that entice their owners to play along by living, inhabiting, protecting, and *taking care* of such sites. The "sweet life" in Sugar Land predicated on the logics of settlements and plantations, however, is only viable for those who succumb to the seduction of whiteness it is designed to protect. As E. Patrick Johnson (2020) writes this seduction, which he discusses in

relation to Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) that painstakingly delves into the pathology of racial self-hatred, is what makes it "difficult to pretend that we are not complicit in the construction of the house that race built" (680). In other words, "the sweet life" marketed and promoted in Sugar Land is inextricably linked to the seductive taste of race cultivated by *deadening* anti-black logics. By living in a city that continues actively to sweeten its violent racial history, the inhabitants of Sugar Land play along in maintaining and refining the hegemonic logics of racial tasting—a sensorial orientation that naturalizes, settles, and sweetens a hierarchy of racial mattering. Regardless of the new residents' ethnic/racial backgrounds "living the sweet" life as promoted and lived and preserved by the municipality of Sugar Land is a way of assuming/performing a positionality that must constantly whiten/erase/sweeten how that prosperity has been (re)produced by enacting racializing fantasies that enable such "whitening" aesthetics/tastes to maintain their dominance and appeal.

Roberts further argues that "understanding earlier patterns of erasure and invisibility explain the initial resistance to public engagement around the fate of the Sugar Land 95" (214). As Roberts notes:

> Unearthing this difficult heritage can also highlight current class- and race-based inequities that disrupt common sense (Gramsci 1999) and this seemingly natural progression rooted in an idealized notion of Fort Bend as the most diverse county in the United States. Notably, increasingly diverse populations driving growth have exposed countywide tensions around not only where schools are built but for whom and atop whose history. (240)

While "sweet" pre and post antebellum symbols are everywhere to be found, it was not until the unearthing of the Sugar Land 95 that the city was then tasked with reckoning with how its history has been whitened/sweetened. Roberts notes that "the remains, enact a disruption in

the plantation logics" as explicated by Kathrine McKittrick in "Plantation Futures." Quoting McKittrick, "the plantation is an ongoing locus of anti-Black violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence," to which Roberts adds "even when covered by perfectly manicured, planned communities" (238). As Roberts further explicates the Sugar Land 95, "these fungible laboring Black bodies haunted, warned, interrupted, and organized even though only their bones remained" (238). The remains, like the living dead that unsettle Bermúdez-Silverman's dollhouses made of sugar, successfully unsettled "the sweet life" that is and has been enacted in Sugar Land since its founding.

The unearthing and memorialization of the Sugar Land 95 haunts by making visible a material history that unsettles the meaning of sugar, Sugar Land has a continued vested interest in preserving. The bones that were unearthed at the former Bullhead Labor Camp Cemetery, however, disrupt the myth that "living the sweet life" in Sugar Land was attained without the labor of those who horrifically perished to create the conditions of prosperity the town now "sweetly" promotes and nostalgically *aestheticizes*. As Roberts poignantly asserts, "The ways convict leasing and other forms of labor exploitation make and remake the Sugar Land landscape into ones in which new forms of Black organizing and geographies emerge allows us to read the bodies as more than their past use-value" (216). Their reemergence from the earth "complicates public history enough to force a response from FBISD, generate support from the county historical commission, and to make sense of decades of the Black labor history defining the regional landscape" (239). Quoting McKittrick, Robert further acknowledges: "The African Burial ground 'tells us that the legacy of slavery and the labor of the unfree both shape and are part of the environment we presently inhabit. They enlist those in the present by integrating the many layers of human history into the current growth and sprawl-based development culture'" (238). As Bermúdez-Silverman illuminates her sugary dollhouses that are in a state of decay, the city's

acknowledgement of the Sugar Land 95 also illuminates the cracks in the myth of sweetness the city has promoted since its founding that can no longer "innocently" be preserved. Regardless of the countless attempts to whitewash this reality, the Sugar Land 95 have now been memorialized and the symbolic resonance of that reality unsettles the fabricated sweetness the city continues to market.

While the Sugar Land 95 disrupt and unsettle the meaning of sugar and the motto of "sweet living" in Sugar Land, the remains have also become symbolic, i.e., representative of a history of racialized violence. Pictures of the misshapen, amputated, and tortured re-interred bones, the signifiers of a "slow death," are now on display but what animated the lives of the Sugar Land 95 can and will never be recovered or repaired. What exactly does it mean, then, when city officials proclaim that the remains of the Sugar Land 95 "have been laid to rest?" Does that imply that their haunting/disruptive capacity ceases? Kara Keeling interrogates the utility of "common memory images" like shackles and chains that are "habitually called forth to construct blackness as silent, suffering, and perpetually violated, just as it attempts to erase the ways antiblack violence is enacted in the present" (74). If tasked with memorializing a violent history that has yet to alter the material conditions of descendants who followed, or the way Sugar Land developments are nostalgically named after settlements and plantations, or the continued erasure of historically black sites like Mayfield Park, the remains could also be said to inhabit the condition of the living dead—zombies stuck signifying/serving a white(ned) system/master that continues to prosper from erasing, excluding, and exploiting bones designed to sweeten bitter realities.

Could it be that the bones, a "living" archive of anti-black violence have not been laid to rest and that they rather continue to haunt, i.e., "prompt something to be done" in a system still vested in reproducing whiten(ed) fantasies? Hauntings, after all, are reminders of "lingering trouble" (Gordon, xix). As Gordon writes "Ultimately haunting is about how to

transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation" (208). The reinterment of the bones and the subsequent work currently under way to contextualize the history, identify the remains, and to contact living descendants of the Sugar Land 95, in several ways attempts to "transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life." But that recognition, is not nearly enough for "a peaceful reconciliation." If the Sugar Land memorial is tasked with honoring the dead and "properly memorializing the Sugar Land 95 in the future," that would entail altering the cultivated, racializing tastes that produced the conditions of the living dead. If idealized symbols that enable racialized practices to appear sweet are not altered then the remains will continue to labor, they will not rest, because the conditions that produced their untimely death have not been altered. The remains, the animated bones and shackles and chains, are asking us to sense how the aspirational structures that surround us are dependent on sweetened depictions that have made the terrible palatable. For the remains of the Sugar Land 95, who were worked to their graves cultivating sugar to "be laid to rest," the municipality of Sugar Land must dramatically alter the taste of living it now markets as "sweet." For now, the sweet myth of Sugar Land has been unsettled by restless bones.

THE TASTE OF SALT

What if a place like Sugar Land, currently haunted by the remains of those deadened to produce sugar, took initiatives to alter the taste(s) of/for the sweetness it continues to cultivate? How do the living dead, the original zombies, gesture towards alternative tastes? In Haitian lore the remedy for a zombie like condition is salt. As Kamia Glover (2010) writes:

> It is crucial to note…that the zombie exists, by definition, in a state that as closely resembles the movement of life as it does the immobility of death. Indeed, the zombie remains completely obedient to his master only as long as it is denied salted food. If the zombie ingests even a single grain of salt, it is brought out of this state of lethargy

> and is immediately transformed into a bois-nouveau [new wood], suddenly awake and aware of its situation. As such, while the zombie's subjugation is profound, it is not necessarily definitive. Rather, the zombie is a creature within whom coexist an utter powerlessness and an enduring chance for rebirth. (59,60)

The only way to free a zombie from unending labor is to feed it salt, an ingredient meant to enliven/awaken the flavor of food and therefore what one can sense, and an ingredient that reorients the sense of taste away from the numbing/deadening "sweetness" that birthed the living dead.

Shortly after the closing of Bermúdez-Silverman's show at CAAM, the dollhouses that survived were displayed in her exhibit *Sighs and Leers and Crocodile Tears (2021)*.[21] Further drawing on the aesthetics of monster lore, the artist continued using materials emblematic of the bounty of colonialism to communicate "how forces like capitalism and colonialism inflict horror on everyday people" (Conor 2021). The title is taken from the nursery rhyme with the phrase "Sugar and spice and everything nice. That's what little girls are made of." The poem continues, "Sighs and leers and crocodile tears. That's what young men are made of," a line which reads as a warning for the frightening/monstrous nature of almost adult masculinity. In the exhibit the binary designations of gender and age under anti-black logics are evident as the racialized masculinity that is pulled from movie imagery including *White Zombie* (1932) and *The Creature from The Black Lagoon* (1954) depicts black(ened) monster(s)/creature(s) on the verge of ravaging/spoiling "sugary" white/innocent femininity. Here again the artist deploys an unsettling aesthetic to render sense-less popular racialized constructs/tropes of Afro-alterity by denaturalizing the taken for granted "innocent

[21] Presented at Murmurs LA, from March 7, 2021-April 10, 2021. For images of the exihit see Isabel Flower, "Sighs and Leers and Crocodile Tears: Sula Bermúdez-Silverman at Murmurs Los Angeles," O FLUXO, 19 Jan. 2019, https://www.ofluxo.net/sighs-and-leers-and-crocodile-tears-sula-bermudez-silverman-at-murmurs-los-angeles/, accessed 19 April 2023.

sweetness" attributed to whiteness and by introducing the antidote to such aesthetic/gustatory orientations.

This time instead of propping the candied ideals on pedestals that stood at the eye of the beholder, the cotton-candy glowing dollhouses were placed on top of bricks of pink Himalayan salt—an ingredient that is pink because of its mineral content associated with providing health benefits ("Pink Himalayan Salt"). Visually salt and sugar can appear to be the same, yet the taste of salt when one expects to taste sweetness is disorienting. This sensorial disorientation could be thought of as the crack in the inherited colonial architectures that enables alternative tasting practices. In this sense, tasting differently, creates the conditions of possibility to alter aesthetic/gustatory orientations originally cultivated in the "new world" by anti-black technologies. Yet the tastes that reorient the beholder to the "demonic grounds," a site with unknowable outcomes rather than taken-for-granted realities, have the potential to induce unsettling and possibly even frightening feelings.

As Avery Gordon (1997) writes "Haunting is a frightening experience. It always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing something-to-be-done," (xvi). That something to be done is articulated by Wynter's radical praxis that begins from the unimagined site where Caliban's feminine counterpart resides, the "demonic ground" that can't be known under the current perceptual and onto-epistemological governing regime but that can be sensed/felt, or as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) writes, a radical praxis entails a process of reconstruction that acknowledges and reclaims value:

> For the Black Feminist Poethics, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it

> still lives. By reconstruction, I should emphasize, I do not mean reparation or a restitution of monetary sum that corresponds to that which mercantile and industrial capital have acquired through colonial expropriation since the sixteenth century. Decolonization requires the setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands. Before we can even conceive on how to design these architectures, we need another account of racial subjugation, for the one we have cannot comprehend a demand for decolonization, that is the unknowing and undoing of the World that reaches its core. Before we can collectively design the framework for reconstruction, we need first to follow Blackness as it signals that knowing and doing can be released from a particular kind of thinking, which is necessary for opening up the possibility for a radical departure from a certain kind of World. (85,86)

To "return the total value" global capital "continues to derive" from the bounty reaped of an ingredient that has dictated tastes and the racial imagination requires setting up alternative aesthetic architectures that release knowing "from a particular kind of thinking" that might precede the "juridico-economic architectures" da Silva proposes.

Bermúdez-Silverman's candied dollhouse series and the city of Sugar Land are constructed sites that reveal the seductive taste of whiteness that is "sweetly" preserved and reproduced by sugarcoating the living nightmare of a system that requires the endless (re)production of black(ened) bones. What I have tried to articulate throughout this chapter is how such material/symbolic constructs are also haunted by the living dead that have contributed to the "value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives," and who animate alternative sensorial orientations to the historically cultivated taste(s) of/for sweetness in the West. Unsettling the tastes of/for anti-black

architectures/technologies/ideologies can engender alternative sense-abilities that rupture the walls of confinement such structures/constructs continue to protect and preserve. Only by rehearsing/practicing/enacting alternative sensorial orientations, that disrupt the racial tastes inherited from colonial architectures can alternative tastes required for the "dividends to be paid to nothing less than the total value derived" from anti-black technologies/ architectures arise. By attuning ourselves to the living dead can the antidote they propose—the salt that awakens/enlivens the senses—orient us to a less imaginable but certainly more enriching and flavor-filled elsewhere.

CHAPTER 3: THE DISTALLATION
Azúcar Negra and the Alchemy of Sweetness

"In the modern Western imagination, blackness has no value; it is nothing. As such, it marks an opposition that signals a negation, which does not refer to contradiction. For blackness refers to matter—as The Thing; it refers to that without form—it functions as a nullification of the whole signifying order that sustains value in both its economic and ethical scenes. — Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter beyond the Equation of Value"

When discussing the significance of sugar, in her personal life and in her art, the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons once related: "My perception of sugar has to do with my personal associations with it as well as seeing it as part of a larger narrative . . . So, there's something almost ancestral, in the bones, for me about the implications associated with sugar production…every "lump of sugar" is produced by the sweat of some individual… Producing sugar is a very, very painful process."[1] Campos-Pons's proximity to an ingredient she senses in her bones also led her to comment: "Sugar makes me cry, and the tears are salty and bitter."[2]She, to this day, does not like the taste of sugar.[3] Yet the material and symbolic traces of sugar have been a focal point of her artistic output. Stemming from the particularity of her own experience, Campos-Pons, who grew up in the former slave barracks of a sugar plantation in the region of Matanzas, Cuba, addresses subjects like the repercussions of colonization, forced migration, and barbarous labor practices–overarching narratives that constituted the encounters between her Nigerian, Chinese, and Hispanic ancestors who made the cultivation, harvesting, refinement, and distillation of sugar cane in the Caribbean possible (Gallery Wendi Norris).

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[1] "Introduction," Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits (exhibition catalog), PEM/Peabody Essex Museum, 2020, http://alchemy.pem.org/alchemy_soul/,
[2] The quote is from an interview in the catalog. See *SUGAR: María Magdalena Campos-Pons* (exhibition catalogue), Smith College Museum of Art, 2010, https://www.smith.edu/art/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/sugar-maria-magdalena-campos-pons,
[3] While interviewing the artist for a *Theatre Journal* issue that featured her work on its cover, Campos-Pons revealed that she does not like, nor does she eat sugar and that her son has inherited the same aversion (Lewis-Cappellari 2020)

Internationally recognized for a professional career that spans over forty years and for the dexterity with which she navigates artistic disciplines that include painting, sculpture, video, installation, and performance, María Magdalena Campos-Pons is an artist that cannot be defined by a single work of art or medium.[4] Her multifaceted work has several points of entry and has been written about extensively.[5] There is, however, something to be said about the overwhelming presence/centrality of the artist *in* and *as* her work. Campos-Pons is known for the varying ways her body of work is reflective of how her particular body has experienced the world as she transmutes personal memories into works of art. It is, therefore, understandable why her artistic oeuvre is often referred to as autobiographical and the subject of identity frequently and persistently emerges. [6] Yet her inquires often extend far past the space, place, and time of her individuated body. This ability to transmute temporal and spatial conceptions through an *embodied* artistic practice is perhaps most experientially evident/felt in her processional, ritualistic performances as she calls upon and welcomes ancestral spirits to join her, her body becoming a site of encounter between those that came before her and her immediate audience.[7] Less evident, but equally as pertinent, I propose, are the ways the artist addresses the performativity of materials, like sugar.

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[4] Campos-Pons was the first Black woman to graduate from the prestigious Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in Cuba, where she later taught before relocating to the United States in 1991. Her work has been featured in several art biennials and festivals and many are part of museum collections. including the Smithsonian Institution; the Whitney; the Art Institute of Chicago; the National Gallery of Canada; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Perez Art Museum, Miami; and the Fogg Art Museum. The artists is represented by Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco (Lewis-Cappellari 2020).
[5] Some useful references include *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (2007) by Lisa D. Freiman and Okwui Enwezor, the exhibition catalogue for *Notes on Sugar: Like the Lonely Traveler* (2018) by the Neon Queen Collective, and the catalogue for *Alchemy of The Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (2015) at PEM http://alchemy.pem.org/alchemy_soul/
[6] See, for example, Brooklyn Museum, "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons," Feminist Art Base, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/maria-magdalena-campos-pons, and "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons," When We Gather, https://www.whenwegather.org/maria-magdalena-campospons
[7] See video excerpt from *Habla Lamadre*, a 2016 performance at the Guggenheim Museum www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmS3R83mHUk,

I first encountered the artist in a making of video.[8] In the video, filmed in preparation for her 2010 exhibit *Sugar/Bittersweet*, we find Campos-Pons discussing her deeply rooted understanding of how the mass production of sugar became the sole purpose her ancestors were forcefully displaced and transported to the cane fields of the Caribbean. The sculptural center piece of *Sugar/Bittersweet* is an assembly of African spears that pierce through disks of raw sugar and cast glass forms. The spears are set on a series of African and Chinese stools and the making of video documents how this assembly of materials is gradually taking the form of a sculptural sugar cane field. As Campos-Pons discusses the materials she's chosen, she immerses herself in the painstaking work of sculpting glass into discs that resemble sugar. "Working with glass is practically the same as with sugar," she told me in a later interview. "You need to grind it, melt it at extremely high temperatures, and then expose it to oxygen to let it solidify again, slowly. This kind of alchemy is similar between glass and sugar, and I concluded that both in certain circumstances are poison" (Quoted in Lewis-Capellari). What the making of video and the subsequent installation unearth is how *Sugar/Bittersweet,* a work of art, is also a physical/psychic mediation on labor and laboring. By enacting the labor of her ancestors, who so frequently are reduced to statistical causalities of a brutal regime of 'sweet' mass (re)production, Campos Pons crystalizes the cultural collisions that brought about the art and the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons.

Campos-Pons' meditations on labor and laboring would bring about one of her largest scale projects to date. Five years after *Sugar/Bittersweet*, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits (2015),* further explores how sugar is susceptible to a form of alchemy (Basseches Part Five). In this installation, the artist reconceptualizes the abandoned sugar mill of her youth—a site that distilled cane sugar into an intoxicating spirit. In *Alchemy of the Soul*, *Elixir for the*

[8] Artist Maria Magdalena Campos Pons short video on "Sugar: Bittersweet" www.youtube.com/watch?v=82fb_uummHU

Spirits Campos-Pons again works with glass, on an even larger scale, to create towering structures that resemble parts of an alchemical laboratory. Conjuring the spirit of sugar, Campos-Pons continues to center the disregarded and reductively represented histories of her ancestors. She, however, does not focus on their marginalization/erasure. Rather, making use of memory and glass, like the spirits that are distilled from cane, she draws attention to their enduring presence. Turning personal, painful legacies into works of art captures important dimensions of Campos-Pons's artistic practice. A practice, as I allude to in the works noted above, Campos-Pons refers to as alchemical (Lewis-Cappellari 2020).

Tracing the notion of alchemy from its beginnings in the West to the twenty-first century across historical, artistic, and literary fields Karen Pinkus (2010) writes "Alchemy is ubiquitous, multiple, and self- replicating. But what is alchemy? A practice? A theory? Some combination of both? A historical oddity or an atemporal spiritual mode? Is alchemy primarily about the production of gold from a base substance?" (1) Towards the later part of his life and career, the psychologist Carl Jung spent a great deal of time trying to figure out some answers to such inquiries. Inspired by 17th century alchemical texts, Jung was fascinated by the dual nature of alchemy as both a chemical process and mystical practice and reflected on the process of personal psychical transformation in the metaphor of transmuting base metals into gold. According to Jung for an alchemist to understand how matter could be altered the alchemist had to come to understand that they themselves must embody the change they hoped to effect within their materials. In a section of *Psychology and Alchemy* (1968) Jung summarizes the way, for example, in which medieval alchemists envisaged the imagination: "The imagination, or the act of imagining, was thus a physical activity that could be fitted into the cycle of material changes that brought these about and was brought about by them. ... Imagination is therefore a concentrated extract of the life forces, both physical and psychic" (277-78).

The psychic/physical connotations of alchemy are also found in Eastern conceptualizations of alchemy. In a scathing review of *Chinese Alchemy* by Obed Simon Johnson (often cited as the scholarly work that brought the knowledge of Chinese alchemy to the West) the reviewer, B. Laufer (1929) notes that Johnson, without due scholarly rigor, claims that the alchemical objective of the Chinese was to turn base metals into gold. As Laufer counters "They did so because they believed that gold produced by the processes of alchemical sublimation and transmutation was endowed with a superior vitality and efficacy in the endeavor to reach salvation and immortality; it was not gold as a metal they craved, but gold of a transcendental quality that would promote the spiritualization of the body" (331). Alchemy, in this context is understood as a psychic/spiritual practice in the pursuit of the preservation of life.

Alchemy in art Pinkus writes, "has been conjured by contemporary critics and artists to describe work that involves material mutations or a certain disposition to experimenting with temporality" (3). As discussed earlier, transforming spatial and temporal conceptions—whether through her ritualistic performances, or through her artistic meditations on the performativity of materials—are at the heart of the art that Campos-Pons performs. If we were to consider alchemy as a symbolic/spiritual and a material/ embodied practice that temporally/spatially transmutes matter of little or no value into matter of greater, or more meaningful value, how then could we come to understand Campos-Pons' alchemical approach to a material she senses in her bones that makes her weep? What is the matter Campos-Pons would like to have matter more? What is Campos-Pons's alchemical objective?

In chapter one I began to interrogate how sugar is the product of an anti-black imaginary by focusing on how representations of sugar were enabled by and enabled a visually reductive practice of consumption I refer to as acts of racial tasting, that gestures towards how the aesthetic and gustatory taste *of* and *for* sugar are mutually constituted. In

other words, representations of sugar reveal the logics/ sense-abilities of racial mattering, where those who have historically produced sugar become the visual markers by which that hierarchy is naturalized, stabilized, and easily consumed. Drawing from Caribbean scholars Edouard Glissant's poetic articulations on historical cultural collisions, Sylvia Wynter's theorizations on the aesthetic realm and the plantation vs. plot dichotomy, and Alejo Carpentier's distinctly Caribbean aesthetic theory he called *lo real maravilloso,* I delve into how Campos-Pons disrupts the anti-black logics of racial mattering by bringing to the fore the disregarded peoples and cultures that converged to produce one of the first ingredients of globalization. I primarily focus on installations that center the materiality/production of sugar, *Sugar/Bittersweet* (2010) and *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits* (2015), to explore how she centers her laboring body to alchemize sugar into a work of art, the process of making alluding to sugar's grueling history (as experienced by her ancestors) and its poetic resonance (as an ingredient of cultural production and her art).

I contend that Campos-Pons goes about such alchemy by centering the still frequently debased/marginalized Black Caribbean—a site she embodies *in* and *as* her work and a cite of knowledge production and art. By centering blackness, I do not wish to negate/erase/abandon her African, Chinese, and Hispanic ancestry but rather draw attention to how her work addresses matters of racial differentiation, as such conceptions are intimately intertwined with historical practices of sugar's (re)production and refinement—a material practice predicated on logics/sense-abilities, where blackness becomes the ground/the base by which racial ideologies, technologies, and hierarchies are established, maintained and (re)produced. And as a way of exposing and countering the continued political-social-cultural-economic investment in "refined" whiteness still associated with sugar production in the context of the

Caribbean today.[9] While still considering the lived embodied implications of blackness as the "mark" of raciality where blackness emerges, for example, as an object/subject of commerce, science, and culture, my conceptualization of blackness here is not as individuated subjectivity. Rather, following the works of scholars such as Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sylvia Wynter, R.A. Judy, Fred Moten, and Zakkiyah Jackson to name a few, I'm conceptualizing blackness as an alternative sensuous/sensual orientation—borrowing from R.A. Judy's (2020) formulation a "practice of living" that offers another ground of perception that pushes the limits of representationalist models of identity. As Jackson has written: "Where blackness is not a referent category, but rather another way of being in the world" (622). I, therefore, argue that Campos-Pons alchemical objective is not to transmute a base substance (blackness) into an "object/subject" of more value, a practice that reproduces a hierarchical logic of mattering. Rather her alchemical/artistic *embodied* practice is one that attempts to transmute that which has not mattered under a regime of racial capitalism—i.e., the disregarded histories/experiences of peoples and cultures that converged to produce sugar—into something that matters by re-orienting tastes/ sense-abilities and perceptions of value towards matters that have always mattered.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF ALCHEMY

When the material objective of alchemy is to create value where there was less before, we must consider how the notion of alchemy is immersed in a logic where matter matters differently—perhaps, a difference determined, like in the case of gold, on the basic economics of scarcity of supply and overall demand. Sugar, as a tall perennial grass, a

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[9] Theorists of race in the Caribbean have considered the ways in which relations of sugar production have shaped emergent notions of race, demonstrating how sugar boom periods correspond with sharper patterns of social differentiation and increased racial difference. See Harry Hoetink, "The Dominican Republic in the Nineteenth Century: Some Notes on Stratification, Immigration and Race" (1971), Lauren Robin Derby, "Race, National Identity and the Idea of Value on the Island of Hispaniola" (2003), Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (2016), and Daniel Rood *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean* (2017)

foodstuff, and alcohol is a remarkable example of a material that has amassed monetary value through its transformations into a medicine, a luxury item, a common household ingredient, and a renewable energy source. Due to its initial scarcity in the West, it was an ingredient once valued like gold and a symbol of status and power (Mintz). Becoming more plentiful and increasingly less expensive, sugar's potency as a symbol of power declined while its efficacy as a source of profit gradually increased, marking the way that sugar was alchemized into what ubiquitously came to be known as "white gold."[10] The symbolic and material forces, that alchemized sugar into "white gold" are an example of a dramatic shift in how this luxury item, that only the wealthiest could afford to consume, began to feed the wealth of the wealthy as sugar became more and more accessible to the masses (Mintz, Williams).

The alchemical inversion of sugar from luxury item to an affordable, accessible commodity was made possible by the plantation economy—i.e., the implementation of single crop farming on massive swaths of occupied land and a black(ened) labor force that under the worst imaginable conditions began to produce sugar at an insupportable speed and volume to feed increasingly insatiable global demands. In one of his many books on the Atlantic Slave Trade, James Walvin (2007) notes:

> Few slaves were spared the rigours of labour on sugar plantations. The old and the young, the sick and the marginal, all were marshalled into suitable jobs for their age and condition. On a sugar property, the enslaved people endured the harshest of conditions, especially in the crop time between the new year and midsummer, when they were exposed to sun, heat, tropical downpours—all good for sugar, but hard on the labour force. . .Human suffering was at its worst on the sugar plantations: life expectancy, infant mortality, low fertility and sickness formed part of the persistent

[10] Listen to "Sugar Highs (And Lows): A History of "White Gold" www.wnpr.org/post/sugar-highs-and-lows-history-white-gold-0

> pattern indicating that sugar slaves fared worse than slaves in other industries and occupations. (125)

With the impending end of slavery in the 19th century, thousands of laborers were brought to the Americas from China and other countries to help "ease" the transition to "free" contract labor.

Sean Metzger (2008) interrogates the idea of freedom in the case of Chinese Cuban labor contracts by contextualizing the impetus behind the 1874 *Cuba Commission Report*—a gruesome record of the experience of Chinese workers in Cuba. Metzger elaborates on how "coolies" under slave like conditions—though differentiated on a color scale as both non-black (not quite a slave) and non-white (not quite free) —experienced an enormous amount of suffering and death on sugar plantations. As Metzger writes about these deadly encounters, corroborated by the laborers themselves in the report:

> Given examples of earlier plantation economies, the fact that varieties of dying fill the pages of the Cuba Commission Report comprises the horrific mundaneess of the sugar industry in Cuba. As an index of the dead, the report groups the victims of this agricultural establishment through a typology—that is how any given coolie met life's end. While beating and hanging provided the most cited means of death, many instances of poisoning, throat cutting, drowning, and boiling occur. (114)

The expropriation of the productive capacity of occupied lands and enslaved/ indentured people that made sugar's sweetness increasingly accessible to the masses, was made possible by a racial imagination that extracts total value from total violence. Sugar was and continues to be a murderous commodity (Brown, Hatch). The alchemy, the toxic chemistry that commodified sugar into an ingredient of wealth and value for the very few also enabled the death of many more others.

Sugar, however, has not only been a product of murderous greed it has also been an ingredient that has fueled artistic expression. What act of the imagination could transform a material that has caused such bitterness into a work of art? As Pinkus furthers, alchemy in its overuse is often "a rhetorical figure for "magic" or "magical transformation of materials" (3). Alchemy's transformational mysticism/magic is often linked with artistic movements such as surrealism. In *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* historian Urszula Szulakowska, for example, analyzes the way twentieth-century artists, beginning with the French Surrealists of the 1920s, appropriated magical concepts and occultist imagery from western alchemical traditions. One of the most visible artistic references for Campos-Pons' *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* is from a painting by the surrealist Spanish-born artist Remedios Varo titled *Creación de las Aves* (Creation of the Birds, 1957), that depicts how the mystical/magical force of alchemy is channeled to create new lived realities.[11] Alchemy as a metaphor for magic could perhaps "magically" transform the bitterness of sugar into something that entices its consumption. However, according to that logic, the pain and subsequent losses experienced by those who produced sugar's value never have, and never will matter. Without a rigorous interrogation of the historical material realities of sugar such a "magical" act simply erases the lived experiences of those who have not mattered throughout the course of sugar's mass (re)production and consumption. Such a magic act rather re-entrenches a racialized/romanticized notion of resilience that places the burden of suffering onto bodies that have had to continue to endure the bitter realities reaped from sugar.

Critics of the transformational/metaphoric magic of art/culture include Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant. Both found fault in their predecessors' artistic/intellectual/political surrealist-inspired *Negritude* movement that, despite its radical anti-assimilation roots, celebrated Black pride as a rediscovery of Africanity—a movement that in its essentialist

[11] "La creación de las aves," can be seen here: historia-arte.com/obras/la-creacion-de-las-aves

search for origins ‘magically’ skips over the irreparable wound of new world slavery (Scott). This ambivalence is seen when Fanon (1964,1988) in his essay “The Problem of the Colonized” at first praises Aimé Césaire for his affirmation of black cultural identity, as Fanon notes “(f)or the first time a lycée teacher—a man, therefore, who was apparently worthy of respect—was seen to announce quite simply to West Indian society “that it is fine and good to be a Negro” (21). By the end of the essay, however, he describes Césaire’s evocation of blackness tethered to Africa as “the great black mirage” (27).

Glissant (1989), furthering this critique, rather thinks of the Caribbean as “the site of a history characterized by ruptures that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade” (61). According to Glissant, a Black Caribbean consciousness is not constituted by an approximation *to* but rather a violent separation *from* Africa. Thus, the initiating event is the slave ship and not the shores of West Africa. As Glissant (1990, 2021) writes “For though this experience made you, original victim floating towards the seas abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others” (53). Glissant’s conceptualization of Caribbeaness, is defined by a process of creolization not determined by concepts of assimilation/ integration, nor of hybridity but rather, as Rinaldo Walcott (McKittrick 2015) has written, creolization brings into focus “the violent process of becoming through/in modernity” (187). As Walcott argues “the importance of creolization conceptually, is that it locates our lives, histories, and experiences between brutality and something different—something more possible” (188). The concept of creolization brings to light that if we willfully forget the rupture, then we are destined to ignore the cultural significance of those who in spite/despite the rupture continued unfathomable “practices of living” (Judy).

In Alejo Carpentier’s (1949, 2017) articulations of a Caribbean aesthetic deeply informed by his time in Haiti he called *lo real maravilloso*, the Cuban novelist also critiqued

the metaphoric 'magic' of surrealism. Carpentier, for example, discusses the French surrealist movement as: "Invoked by means of the usual formulas that make certain paintings a monotonous junk pile of rubbery clocks, tailor's mannequins, or vague phallic monuments, the marvelous never goes beyond an umbrella or a lobster or a sewing machine or whatever, lying on a dissection table inside a sad room in a rocky desert" (xiv-xv). As Judy (2020) elaborates, "The fault Carpentier finds with surrealism is not its pursuit of the strange as marvelous, but rather its representations of the marvelous are all manufactured outside of reality" (11). The effacement of the rupture, of the experiences those enslaved/indentured endured to make sugar available to the masses, would continue to enable the 'sweet' gustatory/aesthetic consumption of a material that in lived realities was/is so materially bitter, while also denying how those experiences contributed to alternative social, cultural, and aesthetic practices—practices, for example, that Sylvia Wynter begins to conceptualize in "Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process" (1970) and "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (1971). Wynter, critical of the assimilationist connotations in the concept of creolization, proposes the idea of black indigeneity, not by seeking essentialist's claims on Africa, nor as a move intended to reassert colonial narratives of "aboriginal extinction,"[12] but rather by underscoring how the logics imposed by the plantation system demanded counter-cultural practices that enabled other ways of being. As she elaborates, if we consider the plantation (the political economy/ontology) as the only site/plot of culture, then we attribute the authors of that fiction total control over what we consider to be cultural production. When, however, we acknowledge the provision plots tended to by those occupied/enslaved as an autochthonous

[12] On the myths/narratives and colonizing logics of aboriginal extinction see Bennett Brazelton "On the erasure of Black Indigeneity" (2021), and Ashley Brown "Afro-Indigeneity in Latin America: Conversations of Diasporic Blackness, Allyship, & Advocacy" (2020)

system that nourishes, not a system of profit but the land and each other, then we begin to see beyond that fiction by acknowledging the production of other ways of feeling/knowing/being that have concomitantly existed yet are repeatedly marginalized/erased/ignored.

Alchemy, as a "rhetorical figure for magic," is in practice the art of erasing or willfully forgetting—an act indicative of a neo-colonial imaginary where the gustatory/aesthetic taste *of* and *for* sugar is made consumable, once more, through the hegemonic cultural practices that refine it for consumption. The inherent problem/potentiality of alchemy is in the embodied/ imaginative capacity that inspires and shapes how matter comes to matter. How then does/can one alchemize a material that has caused insurmountable damage into a work of art without reproducing the same logics/sense-abilities that enabled its dubious consumption in the first place? How does/can one account for the impossible, paradoxical coexistence of sugar as an ingredient of destruction and of creation? How could we arrive to a deeper understanding of alchemy, not just as a metaphor for material rewards or magical transformations but as an artistic/embodied practice that renders alternative material affects? I contend that María Magdalena Campos-Pons' alchemy gestures towards alternative sensorial orientations not reliant on 'sweet' subjugating sense-abilities that open possibilities for tasting/consuming sugar differently.

THE ART OF LABOR(ING) IN *SUGAR/BITTERSWEET*:

THE PLOT

Far different from the idyllic settings of bucolic plantation life that appear with a quick google search of sugar cane fields represented in art, in each of the following cultural productions—whether literary or visual—there is a foreboding sense of what it might feel like to be engulfed by such an environment. For example, in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) the reader first encounters a sugar cane field when the novel's protagonist, Amabel Desir, is forced to flee from state sanctioned forces unleashed to round

up and kill Haitian migrants in 1937 Dominican Republic. Amabel describes the encounter as follows:

> Nor did I want my steps to arouse any animals that might be nesting in the sodden loam, gnawing at the cane roots: rabbits, rats, or garden snakes... A scorching foul-smelling heat rose from the ground; the marsh underneath the cane sank with each of my steps. I felt the short cane spears cutting my legs and covered my face with my hand to keep the tall ones out of my eyes. An ant colony marched up my thighs. The more I smacked them away, the more they crept up my back (157, 158).

In the poem "To Drink My Sweet Body" by Jean-Euphèle Milcé (2014), the Haitian writer and poet, in a similar fashion, details an environment of impending danger and compromised protection:

> It's a world of scents of rotten twigs, of soil. I made my abode there among minuscule critters, insects or larvae, whether they liked it or not. It's dark at all times and I'm not afraid. Mine is this tomb, which cultivates and protects the silence so necessary for resting. I'm a fine connoisseur of the darkness that life has taught me to pass through with my heart. The dark neutralizes the power of the eyes and brings the body back to its critical degree of uselessness. A cane laborer needs a hiding place. You have to outsmart this produce that grows while slicing through your skin with each wind gust.

Perhaps one of the most recognized or referenced contemporary depictions of Caribbean sugar cane fields is depicted by the Afro-Chinese Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam in *The Jungle* from 1943. In a palette of blues and greens that recall a moonlit night or a heavily shaded area, Lam portrays a thick wall of vegetation composed of African and Cubist rendered stalks suggestive of the sugarcane that grew in the fields that those of African descent worked. Carpentier (1949, 2017) evokes Lam, often classified as a surrealist painter, as a central figure of *lo real maravilloso*. He writes that it is Lam, "who'd teach us the magic of

tropical vegetation, the insatiable Creation of Forms of our nature—with all its metamorphoses and symbioses—in monumental paintings that have no equal in contemporary art" (xv). This is the notion that the landscape of the Caribbean is so extreme as to appear fictional or even magical to outsiders and thus a site where the line between magic and reality is blurred. As described in a MoMA catalogue: "At nearly eight feet high by just over seven-and-a-half feet wide, this gouache on paper and canvas composition can feel immersive, or engulfing" (MoMA). Ultimately the representations rendered by Lam, Milcé, and Danticat all depict the visceral/extreme reality of the cane field as a site untamed, densely populated, and sensorially engrossing.

Sugar/Bittersweet (2010), in stark contrast, does not awaken the senses in quite the same way. While the sculptural installation permits the viewer to approach the work spatially, providing an opportunity for a more "immersive" experience, this cane field does not conjure the sights, sounds, and smells detailed above—*it rather* appears as if all organic matters that might have aroused the senses, graphically depicted by Danticat, Milcé, and Lam, have long been exterminated. Featuring columns of raw sugar and glass forms pierced by African spears and placed on low lying stools arranged in a five-by-five grid, Campos-Pons' cane field orients us towards the grounds of a calculated plot. As Campos Pons relates:

> There is a structural element of that piece that is important. It is built like a sugar field with something called a *guardarraya*, a path, a line that separates one field of sugar from another. The configuration of this grid, because sugar fields are these perfected grids of distribution of production, it is economy in the same way as the slave ships, the brutality of the beauty of this image, the efficacy of mathematics, the precision, I aligned the spears and stools in that way. (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari)

With its efficiently and vertically aligned materials, the field is representative of the quantitative logics of the plantation economy, the logics of *more, more, more*.

However, it is not just the premediated alignment, but the color pallet the artist has chosen that illustrates the calculating rationale that made this mono crop into a source of enormous wealth and deep suffering. Consisting of metal, glass, and sugar the cane stalks in *Sugar/Bittersweet* don't come in vibrant and lush greens, they instead range in color from black, to brown, yellow, and white, hues representative of the different values (from dark-black molasses to pristine-white crystals) of sugar throughout the process of its purification and refinement and of the racial tautology (re)produced as result of that process. The color and spatial arrangement of the materials Campos-Pons has fabricated and assembled, promote an understanding of the bitter logics that made sugar "sweet" for mass consumption by drawing our attention to a racial/color hierarchy that became naturalized in relation to sugar.

CUBA, SUGAR, AND THE PRESERVATION OF WHITENESS

As Cuba after the Haitian Revolution became a central actor in the global sugar economy, the (re)entrenchment of a color scale of value linked to sugar's (re)production began to take on new dimensions (Ferrer, Rood). In *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean* (2017), Daniel Rood interrogates some of the discoveries, technologies, and ideologies assisting that shift and writes:

> While the dialectical emergence of white sugar and the "negro" slave has a genealogy going back to the sixteenth century, a new sense of the unique character and frail constitution of sucrose interacted with a racial fracturing of labor organization to redefine the sugar complex and its discourses of color in the 1840s and 1850s. The slave revolts of the early 1840s, together with the introduction of indentured Chinese workers, African- born *emancipados*, and tens of thousands of "white" immigrants from Spain and the Canary Islands, instigated a reinvention of racial ideology. Presumed indispensable to sugar production for over three centuries, black workers

> were recast as necessary but ultimately threatening to a fleeting and lifeless white purity that called for preservation. (8)

Rood, throughout his book, adopts the term "second slavery" to delve into the ways the Atlantic slavery mutated in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, the end of the transatlantic slave trade, and amidst the Industrial Revolution. Despite contemporary notions that slavery's model of production would eventually become outmoded, replaced by competitive free labor, Rood underscores how slavery instead turned to alternative geographies and technologies as demand for commodities, such as sugar, dramatically increased. For example, after 1830, when Cuba took the global reign in sugar production, it doubled its output every 10 years until 1860 (Hu-Dehart). The output of such a supply required yielding and preserving the largest possible quantities of sugar with a division of labor that could respond to such demand. Many of the technological transformations Rood traces are characterized by new preservative techniques applied to perishable commodities such as sugar that enabled the increased shipment and dissemination (assisted by the development and expansion of a railway system that ran from plantation, to mill, to port) of a longer lasting, more "superior" product.

Preservation of life is one of alchemy's objectives, yet the process of preserving the life of sugar comes at the expense of other life. Sugar is preservable the more highly refined it is, the more refined the sugar is, the whiter the color (Mintz 87). By nature, sugar breaks down quickly, a breakdown the brain experiences as "sweet," as the juices that sugar is made from begin to rot the moment the cane is cut—a process called inversion. Those invested in attaining the preservation of sugar, therefore, sought to remove all 'destructive' agents from the cane juice before inversion began. As Rood writes:

> Racial blackness and its biological particularities came to be used as the overarching model for mid- nineteenth- century sugar chemistry's understanding of microscopic

> life in the boiling pan. Twin concerns about the preservation of white sugar and the perpetuation of white racial security generated new notions of a frail but primordial whiteness indelibly linked to a derivative but inevitable blackness. (44)

Rood further details how sugar makers while adapting nineteenth- century vitalist chemistry that posited the animating "life- force" of all organic phenomena, also inverted that notion by cultivating instead what he calls a type of "plantation vitalism." Plantation vitalism was predicated on the attainment of the preservative qualities of "plantation white," which meant the killing of any organic matter that abetted the inversion process—the darker and more "alive" the matter the more threatening and, therefore, more disposable.

In *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Mel Y. Chen looks at how "inanimate assumptions" in the social imaginary illuminate understandings of how "animacy" itself is immersed in hierarchal politics infused by race, sexuality, and ability. Chen proposes that the sorting of bodies as more or less "alive" forms the basic "stuff" or matter of politics asserting that animacy is profoundly implicated in questions of power and recognition, i.e., Chen uncovers how animacy or "liveness" is intimately connected to the right to life (9). Inverting Mel Y Chen's animacy scale, while thinking through the ways inanimate matter can become racialized and perceived in biopolitical terms as an asset or a threat, white sugar becomes more monetarily valuable the deader it becomes. The death required to attain "plantation white" is alluded to, as Metzger excavates in the *Cuba Commission Report*. "In the rhetorical finale to question 40, which asks "When a man dies, how does the employer arrange his affairs?" the response informs the reader of the easy slippage between product and the labor used to create it: "It is certain that for us there will be neither coffin nor grave, and that our bones will be tossed into a pit, to be burnt with those horses and oxen and to be afterwards used to refine sugar, and that neither our sons nor our son's sons will ever know what we have endured" (115). The investment in "whiteness" is

therefore animated by a death drive, i.e., to attain the preservative qualities of refined whiteness all other matter(s) that "invert" the purification process must either be suppressed, killed, or once dead(end) recycled to preserve dead(end) matters.

Before sugarcane reaches the refinement process it must be subjected to a long, arduous process of hacking, crushing, filtering, and distilling—imposing a system of production predicated on skill, immediacy, and efficiency. The various crews of workers in the cane fields, the mill, and the refineries needed to carry out their work simultaneously, each doing the same physical task repeatedly and as quickly as possible. As Rood explains, by the mid-1840s, the Jamaica train—the most common, yet inefficient and dangerous method for converting sugarcane—was increasingly being replaced by the Derosne system, a vacuum-sealed process first developed in relation to the European sugar beet industry (5). The Derosne system required a spatial organization which became oriented along a racial division of labor in Cuba: "Anglo machinists, white creole overseers and sugar masters, Chinese skilled laborers, and an internally divided population of enslaved workers, with Cuban-born operatives often placed in skilled positions, and African- born *bozales* left to cut the cane" (Rood, 34). Ideas of racial fitness/skill for different kinds of labor and the impending fear of rebellion deeply influenced the design of the new plantation factories. According to Rood the planters who had made fortunes in the illegal slave trade began importing tens of thousands of Chinese laborers in *la trata amarillia*, who many felt were better suited to high-technology machine operation. Slaves were removed from the heart of the system, presumed "unskilled," and put to work at its margins (29, 30). Racial hierarchies were validated and naturalized by technocratic innovations, as planters, chemists, and engineers refined biologically ordered divisions of labor. The "experts" who engineered Cuba's sugar boom thus fixed a color scale of value that resembled the *ingenio's* mode of production.

Campos-Pons' choice to recreate a cane field by featuring the product of a calculated plot—the racial-spatial composition determined by the 19th century plantation economy of Cuba—illuminates how the matter(s) that mattered more were those that were closest to the desired goal of "white" purification/refinement—the further from the inverting dangers of black(ened) matter(s) the more refined and whiter the product suited for preservation. Yet the exhibit does not only draw our attention to the bitter, deadening logics of racial mattering. As Campos-Pons relates:

> I used glass, and real sugar *panela*, sugar that is not fully refined for trade. There is a denomination of a particular sugar grass called *cristal*, glass in Spanish. This was a conceptual entry. I'm in this territory where the materiality of the product is almost consistent with the denomination of it. It's like a tautology, glass, *cristal*, and sugar is called all of this. I started using glass very early on in my work because it's like memory, fuzzy, transparent, you can see through it, but it's not completely clear, it's fragile, it breaks, but you can glue it back together; it still has integrity though something has changed. (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari)

Deploying her blown glass technique to make glass replicas of sugar, Campos-Pons (re)enacts the labor of her ancestors to transmute sugar into a material of memory and preservation. In the process of creation Campos-Pons, the alchemist, embodies the change she would like to see reflected in the matter(s) she is working with. By taking on a labor-intensive task to address the materiality of sugar, the artist underscores how the skill(s) required to (re)produce sugar, though historically undervalued, were skillfully essential to its production.

REORIENTING RACIALIZED NOTIONS OF SKILLED VS. UNSKILLED

In "Material Traces Performativity, Artistic 'Work,' and New Concepts of Agency," Amelia Jones proposes that some of the key insights of the animated and animating potential

of materialities is “that through their specific manifestations, they promote an understanding of the previous actions involved in their having been made in the past" (28). The materiality of *Sugar/Bittersweet* opens the possibility to reflect not just on the product but the labor that historically produced sugar and the artistic labor that produced *Sugar/Bittersweet*. To mold glass into discs that appear like sugar Campos Pons works with molten glass at temperatures that reach 2000° degrees. Cast glass or ‘glass casting’ is usually done by then carefully ladling the hot molten glass into a mold. After the glass has cooled comes the task of transporting and assembling the fragile, breakable material (“The Crucible. Guide to Glass Casting”). Glass, like sugar, is a material that demands intense labor, precision, and sweat. Creating the glass discs that are used throughout the installation, Campos-Pons engages in a skilled physical practice that metaphorically embodies the work of enslaved/indentured workers handling sugarcane throughout the refinement process—an agricultural system that continues to demand skilled physical labor. [13]

The skill required to cut cane, is a fact that tends too often to be obfuscated by racialized notions of value attributed to “skilled” vs. “unskilled” labor. “Skilled” connotes some sort of intellectual capacity, i.e., the more disembodied, the more skilled, the more capable of designing or handling the machinery required to refine cane—as noted earlier with the racialized assumption that Chinese indentured workers were “better suited” for machine operation. Unskilled, on the other hand, refers to the de-intellectualized body, the “brute force” as Fernando Ortiz describes throughout *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940,1995) that sugar

[13] As a 2018 study on “Sugarcane cutting work, risks, and health effects” in Revista de Saúde Pública discusses: “The process of manual cane cutting is an activity that imposes a high physical load on the cutter, since it requires the performance of vigorous, fast, and repetitive movements with a machete. In addition, there is the loading of the sugarcane bundles. The manual cutting of cane requires the cutting of several canes near the ground and their gathering in bundles that weigh about 10 kg to 15 kg. The bundles are loaded for about two to five meters and arranged in rows to be picked up by the trucks that transport them to the mill for grinding. Payment per production is an additional risk factor, as it induces a longer rate of work to guarantee a slightly better wage and a greater possibility of hiring in subsequent harvests” (Leite et al., 80).

cultivation demands. Yet in a defining moment of Cuban impendence the skill required to cut cane would come into sharp relief. In 1970, 11 years after the Cuban revolution and the birth of Campos-Pons, Cuba under Fidel Castro attempted to produce the greatest sugarcane harvest in its history: the *Zafra de los diez millones*, the ten-million ton harvest.[14] In this *Zafra*, the backbreaking labor of the *mocha*—the cutting of sugarcane by hand—would not be left to those who cultivated cane, many of them the descendants of slaves, but rather the labor would be assumed by all Cubans and anyone else in the world who wished to be part of the revolutionary attempt. Sugarcane harvesting, according to Castro, was the kind of work that "a free man can assume only on the basis of the most profound revolutionary consciousness" (Quoted in Allen 2015). As Esther Allen (2015) details by evoking Ortiz's personification of sugar, "Once again, Doña Azúcar was drawing laborers from across the planet to work in her fields. This time they weren't abducted, shackled, transported on death ships, and, in the unlikely event they survived the journey, sold, branded, beaten, and forced into unceasing and merciless physical effort. This time, they came voluntarily, and for the short term."

As Allen further elaborates, Castro and the workers that arrived to contribute to the cause were naively under the impression that the labor that sugar demands, requires no previous experience, no skill.

> Had anyone been listening to them, the people of La Vega could have explained that this isn't the case and could have predicted what was going to happen. Even an eleven-year-old girl like María Magdalena Campos-Pons—whose father first went into the cane fields to harvest when he was twelve, singing a Yoruba song he learned from his great-grandfather—could have told you. Alma Guillermoprieto, teaching dance that year at the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Cubanacán, where Campos-Pons

[14] To lay the path towards economic independence, Cuba after suffering a series of economic setbacks post the 1959 revolution, attempted to ween its economic reliance on the Soviet Union, and Castro mobilized the nation with this plan (Volsky 1970).

later studied art, could have told you: 'Any dancer could have told Fidel that the movements of the dance of the zafra—elastic when stooping to the base of the stalk, where most of the sugar is stored, forceful when cutting the bundle of stalks with a single stroke of the machete, and precise when stripping each cane of its leaves—can't be learned in a single day, or even in several' (Allen).

Revolutionary, ideological alignments alone do not bestow the ability to effectively wield a machete. An experienced cane cutter harvests "seven or eight times more cane in a day than the fittest ordinary human, and ten or twelve times more than the average doctor, lawyer, musician, artist, or professor pressed into service in the fields" (Allen). The *Zafra de los diez millones*, which relied heavily on laborers with no prior knowledge and a large degree of magical thinking, fell far short of its goal by millions of tons, proving in the process that the harvesting of sugarcane demands quite a bit of unrecognized skill. The production of sugar crystals, the materiality of a product that is "almost consistent with the denomination of it," as Campos Pons related, was her conceptual entry point. To produce *Sugar/Bittersweet* Campos Pons, therefore, chose to imitate the skill-filled physical labor required to produce sugar by enacting the skill-filled physical labor required to make glass replicas of sugar. This embodied practice reorients the sense of value attributed to racialized notions of skill and gestures towards the conceptual and physical labor required to crystalize undervalued realities into works of art.

THE MATERIALIZATION OF MEMORY, AN ALCHEMICAL ACT OF PRESERVATION

Originally trained as a painter, Campos-Pons has been working with glass since 1993 ("María Magdalena Campos-Pons: The Rise of the Butterflies"). Some works of note include *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998-2008), and *Threads of Memory* (2004) which, like *Sugar/Bittersweet* conceptually address how encounters with the materiality of daily work

routines provide points of connection between past and present. [15] Glass, like the memories evoked when tasting sugar, is also a material that provides a meditation on the role of memory as Campos Pons further explains:

> (g)lass…is everywhere in domesticity; its everywhere in habitat. If you drop a piece of glass, it can escape you. There is something about the implications of fragmentation and a possible loss that are found in memories that are also found in glass. So, it's a material that I have a fascination with, and I think I will use it for a while until I can finish telling what I need to tell with it. It's very demanding but, at the same time, a very gentle material. (Chancy, 203)

This fascination with the materiality of something that is hard, almost impossible to work with yet delicate and poetic gestures back to the type of alchemy Campos Pons performs in *Sugar/Bittersweet.* Her choice to use real sugar and to fabricate glass replicas does not magically skip over the difficult, physical, skill-filled demands, the experience/ knowledge required for their material production. Nor does glass replace sugar, becoming a matter of more value in her art. Rather by centering the production and materiality of sugar (through the materials she's either fabricated or assembled) she orients us not only to a historical plot of destruction—the reductive logics of a racial-spatial order of value—but also to a plot of encounters that enabled *Sugar/Bittersweet*'s contemporaneous production.

Jasbir Puar considers the notion of encounters generative in "I'd rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess, Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," (2012) by proposing that there is a way that we can integrate how theories on matter and mattering might animate conceptualizations of Kimberlé Crenshaw's widely applied analysis and intervention of

[15] Campos-Pons describes *Spoken Softly with Mama* with the following reflection: "A space can bear the imprint of its inhabitants even in their absence. An object can personify an individual even more than his or her portrait. This is the concept behind the selection of objects-furniture for the installation; a portrait of a family narrated through the voices of objects that constitute their environment" ("Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Spoken Softly with Mama (1998-03)").

intersectionality. Puar illuminates the antagonism between literature on intersectionality that has focused on representational politics and whose scholars have questioned the political efficacy and universalizing tendency of blurring subjective distinctions, with those scholars who are convinced of the nonrepresentational referent of "matter itself." Here Puar refers to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblage* in *A Thousand Plateaus,* that proposes that subjecthood is not determined or contained in isolated identifiable subjects, but rather that subjecthood entails the notion of *agencement* defined as "a collection of things which have been gathered together or assembled." It is then an arrangement of those things that provide sense or meaning (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). As Puar writes, their argument about assemblages "foregrounds not constants but rather 'variation to variation' and hence the event-ness of identity."

Campos Pons who left Cuba in 1989 has before and after that self-initiated "exile" articulated the event-ness of identity in her work. The artist, for example, recently shared the following: "I have talked a lot about the instability and the malleability of identity. I am talking to you now from Nashville. I have been here for three years. I can imagine how much of what I have encountered here has been incorporated into Magda, to María Magdalena Campos-Pons from the East coast, Europe, the Caribbean, and now here this Center-South. Identity is a mutant; it is impermanence" (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari).

Puar proposes that we could think of intersectionality as an encounter, where categories such as race, gender, and sexuality are considered events and actions between bodies rather than simply attributes of subjects. While Puar is not proposing any sort of harmonious union between intersectionality and matter driven theories she does think that there is productive friction in bringing these lines of thought together. Puar for example references Manuel DeLanda and his book *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, who argues that race and gender are situated as attributes only within

a study of "the pattern of recurring links, as well as the properties of those links" (2006, 56). Thinking therefore about the event-ness of identities as a series of encounters, a pattern of recurring links that provide sense or meaning assists in understanding the cultural collisions that produced sugar and its color scale of value, the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and to *Sugar/Bittersweets*' ongoing meaning-making, or as Amelia Jones (2015) has written about the performativity of materiality in works of art, "its potential to connect us to past materialities, and thus to past agential forces, whether fully human or not" (10).

Campos-Pons' embodied artistic expression is deeply informed by the encounters that enabled sugar's production. If we consider the plantation plot, that naturalized a color scale of value, then the performativity of race in relation to sugar matters—i.e., it has material effects. Sugar's value in this plot is predicated on the deadening of black(ened) matters for the preservation of whiteness (both materially and symbolically). Campos-Pons draws our attention to that plot, but she also draws us towards another site, another plot, to other encounters that disrupt the naturalization process prescribed by the plantation plot and to the faulty notion that the plantation plot is/was the only plot that exists(ed). Campos-Pons' enacts alchemy by re-encountering materiality with a different orientation of value, one that negates value predicated on subjugation. The artist, the alchemist, acknowledges the value of counter-hegemonic plots as *Sugar/Bittersweet* does not only bring into focus the product/production of a racial-spatial ordering but, by enacting the labor performed by her ancestors, the artist simultaneously preserves that which in the plantation plot is always under threat of extinction, i.e., Blackness. The preservation of Blackness, as an orientation rather than a categorical description, unearths other ways of living/being based on value systems that pre-existed and were forged to survive a system predicated on extinction. It is a plot based on the preservation of life rather than the preservation of dead(ened) matters. While racial thinking, naturalized on the plantation plot, continues to render material effects, it does not hold value

in/on this plot that's driven by the preservation of life. The materiality of sugar provides Campos-Pons the ability to address these appositional plots.

Not incidentally the artist, therefore, approaches the cultural collisions that produced sugar in *Sugar/Bittersweet* by creating encounters with material objects. For example, she evokes Africa, by assembling metal antique spears that pierce through the glass and sugar discs and discusses the encounters that led to this choice:

> I interviewed many people to make this, from places where sugar is produced. I had a conversation with a Brazilian woman who described the terror of the sugarcane cutters, of how people sliced their eyeballs with the edge of the grass. That's one of the reasons for the spears. I thought this beautiful grass is also a weapon against certain bodies. There was also a complicity of black traders in Africa who collected other citizens, other African bodies, and spears were used in that scene of complicity. (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari)

The African spears rise over (and sometimes drop beneath) small wooden stools from Africa and China. Between the stools and the top of the spears, where the glass and sugar are vertically stacked, Campos-Pons states "is an accumulation of pain and sorrow" (Smith College Museum of Art). The materiality of the spears, as an object of complicity and as the stem/stalk of Campos-Pons' cane field, provide insights into how the Transatlantic slave trade—initiated for the purpose of producing sugar—made the slicing of flesh a prerequisite for sugar's sweetness. The spears direct the beholder to the inherent dangers involved in sugar's cultivation based on a plot that benefits those who brutally spill blood.

Another encounter with Africa that perhaps informs Campos-Pons' plot is an Africa to which she feels intimately connected. As the artist relates, she encountered Africa every day in Cuba.

> In my country, in my setting, in my town, the "problem" of being African wasn't about physical placement or about land. When we talked about Africa. We didn't talk about the continent. Africa was in my backyard. My father talked about my great grandpa, who came from Nigeria, in such a way that we don't even talk about Nigeria, Nigeria was in my backyard. We didn't have any idea of going back to Africa. We didn't need it. Africa was there in my family. I don't know how to explain that, but the center of my ancestors wasn't focused on displacement the way that it is in the United States…Whatever we needed to dig for from our past was there…I didn't need to dig deep to find my past. (Freiman 2007)

Such memories left their mark on Campos-Pons and survived the violence of the Middle passage and in fact supersede (i.e., both before and after) that irreparable rupture. Like glass that breaks but can be glued back together, as Campos Pons says, "it still has integrity though something has changed." While Campos-Pons' connection to Africa could too easily be explained by the fact that seven of her great grandparents were Yoruba from what today is known as Nigeria and arrived on the shores of Cuba late into the 19th century, her connection to her cultural ancestry is not only defined/determined by this connection (Basseches Part One).

In addition to the site-specific spears, the installation consists of Chinese stools and roped weights that allude to the weighing of the cane after harvest and to the Chinese indentured laborers who are also a part of Campos-Pons' ancestry. Campos-Pons has referenced the non-visible aspects of her ancestry through the encounters with objects that were ubiquitously present throughout her life in Cuba. In, for example, *My Mother Told Me I was Chinese. The Painting Lesson* (2008) Campos Pons, for one of the first times in her art addresses her approach to her Chinese ancestry:

> When I was invited to the Guangzhou *Triennial* in 2008, the theme was: *Farewell to Postcolonialism*, and I thought it was an amazing opportunity to approach the story of my Chinese ancestry. At first sight, you can't see it in my face. My mother has a little more of these features on her side of the family from my mother's father. An important aspect in this is that on the Yoruba alters, the *Regla de Osha* in Cuba, the vessels, where the offerings are placed, are Chinese porcelain. There is an interconnection and juxtaposition of Chinese and Black culture that is common knowledge and also not visible. (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari)

As she further explains:

> I found a path to my Chinese culture through an artistic language that talks about this sleeping component, of this so-called identity that is never named, that is not visible. There are others, and this is what I think about the complexity of identity of defining who we are, we are many things at once. It's important because those conversations have political, social, and economic implications all the time. I'm working on them in the realm of the poetic, the visual, and hypothetical, but they have real implications. (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari)

The objects of labor and production that Campos Pons has assembled in *Sugar/Bittersweet* enables another type of access to cultural encounters not based on visually reductive practices of consumption. They create the possibility for the non-visible components of her identity to share the same plot as the more visible ones.

In countering over-readings of Campos-Pons' identity as diasporic, Miriam Chancy (2013) explicates how though the artist has refused to define herself in exilic terms, critics such as Okwui Enwezor still apply that descriptor, "as a means of making the art intelligible in a post-colonial framework" (174). As Enwezor asserts: "This type of disassociation is typical of Campos-Pons' approach to questions of identity. Yet in spite of her refusal to be

categorized as a Cuban exile, a category that carries with it troubling ideological connotations, she expresses the exilic condition through its more profound manifestation, as a condition of a compound contemporary global existence. However, she also historicizes this condition. (Diasporic Imagination, 78). In agreement with Chancy, Campos-Pons does not deny her history of displacement "but reconstructs it from points of origin simultaneously located within Cuba across the ocean in Nigeria, while situating the *production* of her self-composition squarely in Cuba itself (175). Evoking Wynter (1971), Campos Pons underscores how the ontological plot is not only determined by the power structures that produced the system. Campos Pons' sugar plot also reflects the cultural collisions, the encounters that became the grounds for sugar and *Sugar/Bittersweet*. The "production" of Campos-Pons' self-composition is a manifestation of the event-ness of identity that occurred on Cuban soil, and the materialization of her memories, her imaginative capacities, her art, that far extend beyond its borders.

As an ancestral descendant, who intimately understood the labor required to (re)produce sugar's sweetness, Campos-Pons' artistic work pays solemn *homage* to those who labored to satisfy a global sweet tooth, while also laboring, as I have argued throughout this section to draw attention to and transmute the bitter categorical/ statistical logics that (re)produced sugar's gustatory/aesthetic sweetness. However, the materiality of Campos-Pons' sugar plot does not inspire a sense of empathy; it does not provide the beholder the possibility to step into the shoes of those who endured the cane fields depicted by Danticat, Milcé, and Lam—an act that as Saidiya Hartman has written has the potential of erasing the sentience of those who have had that experience (1997). Campos-Pons rather offers an encounter with the bitter/sweet matter(s) that shaped the art and the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons by laboring to bring sensorial attention to the materiality of sugar's production. By orienting us towards the racial-spatial plot of production, to the skill required to produce

sugar, and to the encounters with materialities that shape how one experiences the world, Campos-Pons not only lays bare the reductive logics of racial mattering but circumvents them by underscoring a plot not predicated on such logics. In *Sugar/Bittersweet* Campos- Pons alchemical practice crystalizes the innumerable undervalued matter(s) that produced sugars sweetness and transmutes them into matters worthy of preservation in her art—an act that enables what a Chinese contract laborer once imagined as an impossibility when he claimed, "that neither our sons nor our son's sons will ever know what we have endured." Campos-Pons alchemy directs the beholder to the potential of such unimaginably terrible experiences mattering.

ALCHEMY OF THE SOUL, ELIXIR FOR THE SPIRITS AND THE ART OF VISUAL DISLOCATION

As *Sugar/Bittersweet* unearths, subverts, and transforms the dead(end) grounds, the calculated plot that (re)produced sugar for mass consumption, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (2015) is all about an atmosphere receptive to the spirits evoked/produced by sugar. [16] Originally commissioned by the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts it thematizes the trans-formation of sugar as it was exported from Cuba and brought to New England to be distilled into rum and remains the largest and most recent of Campos-Pons' sugar works. Featuring towering glass-blown sculptures, that appear like equipment meant for a distillery or an alchemical laboratory, Campos-Pons draws on the abandoned sugar mills of her youth to conjure the spirits that produced/ and were produced by dark molasses. Audio accompaniment, created by Campos-Pons's frequent collaborator composer Neil Leonard, a video experience detailing a recent visit by the artist to her hometown, La Vega in the province of Matanzas, figurative and photo-based paintings featuring the artist from previous exhibits, and the smell of sugar and rum also fill the

[16] Curated by Joshua Basseches, then deputy director and chief curator at the PEM, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* was on view from January to April 2016.

exhibition galleries. "We want you to experience the juxtaposition of what you smell, hear, see," Campos-Pons relays in an interview. "These textures, these three languages, these elements mix and bring you to this place of visual dislocation" (Quoted in Sharp 2016).

While the industrial sized blown glass structures in the work allude to the site-specific industrial ruins of the now defunct sugar mills of Cuba and the rum distilleries of New England, Campos-Pons set out to create a site of visual dislocation that underscores the disorienting experience of the Triangular trade. The Triangular trade, so called because of the triangulated network of coastline points connecting the Atlantic, including the west coast of Africa, the Caribbean, and North, Central, and South America, established how goods/bodies were displaced and transported as fungible commodities by burgeoning capitalist forces. As Campos-Pons describes, "It's not just about the materiality of sugar, but it's a piece too about the experience of migration, of exile, of displacement. Because I come from a lineage of people displaced forcefully to come to the Americas to work in the industry that produced this ultimate product, rum and sugar" (Quoted in Sharp). For Campos-Pons, the sugar industry, from cultivation, to harvest, to refining, to the distillation of sugar into rum, offers a history lesson in capitalism's global order; its logics of mattering/value:

> Sugar production, trade, and consumption contains the power structures of the world, and its repercussions are still present today. . . Sugar . . . caused the first and most cruel human trafficking in history; the lesson learned there is disguised in other forms today, and the imbalance of power that structures its reign are still alive in the twenty first century. (Quoted in exhibition catalogue *Notes on Sugar* 2016, 10)

While scholars might debate whether the transatlantic slave trade was the first to mark such a brutal and irredeemable practice, there is no denying that it marked a substantial order of being in the world that is still globally felt/experienced today. By designing a site of visual dislocation for a museum (a site of culture that privileges sight) in New England (a key site of

the Triangular trade), Campos-Pons provides an opening to explore how the disorientation of the senses might alter/disrupt historically conditioned orientations predicated on hierarchical logics of value.

The title, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* is charged with meanings that hint at how a site of visual dislocation might provide the conditions of possibility for altering/ enriching a state of being—alchemy's ultimate objective. The word "spirits" is synonymous with alcohol, that is distilled/transformed from a solid like sugarcane, into a liquid like rum. In the 8th century, alchemists in the Middle East were the first to master distillation as they believed that the practice released the pure essence or "spirit" of a substance heavily associated with the essence of life, the human spirit. [17] Distillation was not only developed to separate mixtures and to purify liquids in hopes of making gold, it was also developed/practiced in an attempt to attain an "Elixir of Life" said to cure all diseases. [18] The distillation of "spirits," therefore, was an attempt to understand how a state of being could sustain, enliven, and prolong its material dimensions. This practice/belief was taken up several centuries later in Europe, as the seventeenth-century alchemist Pierre-Jean Fabre writes: "Alchemy is not merely art or science to teach metallic transmutation so much as a true and solid science that teaches how to know the centre of things, which in the divine language is called the Spirit of Life" (Quoted in Garrigues, 1983). In alchemy, both spiritual and material approaches were inextricably entangled.

The "spirits" Campos-Pons grew up in proximity to in La Vega, included the spirits distilled from sugarcane and the spirits that were regularly summoned in Afro-Cuban

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[17] This technology was developed by the semi-mythical Persian alchemist considered the father of Arab Chemistry Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan, whose most important achievement was the alembic still. An alembic is a liquid-filled container placed over a heat source. Connected by a tube to another vessel, it allows vapors from the heated substance to pass through the tube, allowing it to condense and drip into the other container. That condensation, which is the essence of the distilled material, became known as the "spirit." (Amr and Tbakhi 52-53).

[18] Sometimes equated with the name philosopher's stone, is a potion that supposedly grants the drinker eternal life and/or eternal youth ("Elixir" in Britannica)

religious practices such as Santería that acknowledged and honored ancestors and mystical divinities important in African cosmogonies (Chancy, 204). While Campos-Pons grandmother was a Santería priestess, neither Campos-Pons nor her parents were initiated. They did however participate in rituals, and religious ceremonies which took place in their neighborhood. Campos-Pons father raised animals and herbs used in such rituals, a practice that Campos-Pons documents in works like *The Herbalists Tools* (1994).[19] As Lisa Freiman in the catalog *Everything is Separated by Water* (2007) relates, Campos-Pons' own relationship to such religious practices/beliefs was complicated "as she was taught in post-revolutionary Cuba to be a good material Marxist" (31). Myriam Chancy (2013) discusses how African religious practices were suppressed not only during the time of enslavement, and pre-Castro governments but also in post-revolutionary Cuba. While attempting to rectify racial inequities, the Castro reign actively suppressed African syncretic religions (191). Although for Campos-Pons and her family there might have been a public and private association with these ideologies, they would have been informed by both. The encounters with these paradoxical belief systems are reflected in the matters Campos-Pons works with that cannot be detached from their spiritual connotations. As Freiman further notes, Campos-Pons' work "should be seen in relation to other aesthetic practices that integrate Afro-Cuban rituals with installation and performance art" (40).

The artist indicates in her title that the practice of alchemy is meant for the soul, implying alchemy has beneficial or healing properties for a/the spirit. An elixir is a medicinal potion that has life-giving or life-sustaining properties. Alchemy, if understood as a healing practice that enriches a state of being requires an acknowledgement of spirit(s) that sustain all forms of life. Therefore, I argue, in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, Campos-Pons

[19] The artist "recalls scenes that I grew up with, when my father would go into the forest and bring back specific plants for the use of the people" (Quoted in Freiman, 43).

as the artist/alchemist alters the way sugar (with its material and symbolic hierarchies and quantifications) has been (under the scopic regime of racial capitalism) tasted/consumed by creating an atmosphere (a site of visual dislocation) designed to attune the public to sense-abilities receptive to spirits that have *always* held value in sugar's production.

ROUTES TOWARDS A SITE OF VISUAL DISLOCATION

The public's journey towards Campos-Pons site of visual dislocation would have begun when they boarded the museum's freight elevator up to the second-floor gallery which was filled with burlap sacks of sugar and a record player that spun a 45 of traditional Cuban music recorded by Leonard.[20] "We wanted to use the freight elevator as like a dock," Leonard explains, "and Cuban rumba came from the docks...the most famous rumba group to come from the docks featured [Raphael Navarro Pujado] El Niño, so we asked him if he would record some songs that he sang on the docks, carrying sugar, as a young boy " (Quoted in Shea 2016). [21]

As part of their research—that later became part of the video documentation that accompanied the exhibit— the pair traveled to Matanzas which marked the first time in thirty years that Campos-Pons had been back to La Vega. "We went to sugar factories, we talked to people who worked in sugar factories, and we thought about what came from Matanzas to Salem," Leonard said of their trip, "and one thing would be sugar — but another thing that came through a slightly different route was music" (Quoted in Shea 2016). As Campos Pons relates: "Here in Boston, you eat the sugar, you drink the rum, but you never hear the voices of the people who produced them. When you put his [Navarro's] voice in an elevator in Salem, it's a beautiful gesture of cultural negotiation" (Quoted in Shea 2016). By

[20] Titled *Songs from the Docks* Side A played on the way up, and side B for the way down. For a link to this recording: "CUBA DISTILLED: Bringing Sound to Alchemy of the Soul" alchemy.pem.org/cuba_distilled/

[21] Leonard recorded singer Rafael "El Niño" Navarro Pujada at home in his living room. "I wanted the best of the best," Leonard said—and Navarro is the iconic voice of Afro-Cuban rumba. He is featured on many recordings, including the Grammy-winning *La Rumba Soy Yo* (Quoted in Shea 2016).

foregrounding Navarro's voice Campos-Pons and Leonard brought the public/consumer in intimate proximity to those who not only enabled sugar's export to New England but also produced a distinct style of Afro-Cuban musicality.

Cuban rumba, that emanates from African music and dance traditions, carries within it the history of Cuba's plantation economy, along with the racial dynamics from which Cuban national identity and popular music emerge. The original Cuban rumba players, direct descendants of those enslaved for the sole purpose of cultivating and harvesting sugar cane, were amongst the poorest socio-economic class in Cuba (Bodenheimer, 2015). In the port of Matanzas, these burgeoning musicians typically found work on the docks where they were tasked with unloading ship cargo and loading them back with sacks of sugar and barrels of rum. The work, poorly paid and physically exhausting, would be filled with lulls between shipments, in this downtime Cuban rumba was cultivated (Pick 2015).

While rumba music was produced by descendants of slaves still tethered to sugar's mass (re)production and distribution, its joy-filled upbeat tone does not elicit the harshness of its historical production. On the elevator album, Navarro sings: "*Nosotros los Matanceros cuando cantamos Cantamos con ritmo alegre y buen compás.* We from Matanzas, when we sing, we sing with a cheerful rhythm in perfect time"—a passage indictive of how the bitterness of work meant to crush the soul was offset by the sweetness of songs meant to sustain the spirit. The journey on the freight elevator—a space allocated for the transportation of persons and cargo—acts as an apparatus for tuning the public into the sounds and movements, the aesthetic qualities, the tastes cultivated by a historically undervalued labor force's aesthetic contributions to internationally consumed Afro-Caribbean cultural production. Though regionally specific, rumba departs from the ports of Cuba and reverberates far beyond its shores ("Latin Roots: Cuban Rumba" 2012).

Recognized for its polyrhythmic drumming, the Cuban rumba is recorded quite differently for this installation. Leonard, for example, didn't focus on drums. As Nancy Pick (2015) writes about this decision in the online exhibition catalogue: "He felt that the high-energy dance beats of rumba would have clashed with the tone of Campos-Pons's blown-glass sugar mill, which led him to record Navarro singing a cappella." This choice was informed by the atmospheric dimensions the artist wanted *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* to convey. For example, when discussing the qualities of the soundscape, Campos-Pons wrote Leonard a poetic proposition: "Emptiness and fullness. Mass that exists in one form translated into another form. A liquid that travels down into a narrow neck. Translucency. The rusted deterioration of a surface. A ghostly feeling" (Quoted in Pick). Leonard, in response, distilled Navarro's raspy, haunting voice from the drums of rumba to attain this ghostly dimension while the fragility/vulnerability of Navarro's singing compliments the glass structures the public would soon experience upon arriving to the second-floor galleries.

Once the freight elevator opened the public would have entered a gallery that was dimly lit, and they would have experienced the scent of sugar being distilled into rum substitute, felt a humid atmosphere, seen five of the six glass sculptures that comprise the work, and they would have continued to hear Leonard's compositions. In addition to *Songs of the Docks*, Leonard was commissioned to compose a soundscape to surround Campos-Pons's work titled *Sounds for Alchemy of the Soul*. As described by the exhibition curator, Joshua Basseches: "In Neil Leonard's eight-channel soundscape, voices and notes rise up, reverberate, and dissolve in the gallery. The ambient sounds of the fields surrounding Cuban sugar mills are heard in the background. The clave of the rumba group Los Muñequitos de Matanzas fades into the distinct resonance of rum moving inside a glass vessel." (Part 5).

According to Leonard, “Magda’s colorful, luminescent sculpture evokes the presence of the people who worked in the sugar factories and rum distilleries…adding voices gives the work another dimension, one it woudn't have if the installation were silent. In this context, silence is almost like a tomb. But we want to give the sense that the work is breathing” (Quoted in Pick). Leonard sonically inspired by Campos-Pons’ poetic proposition, composed a score meant to bring a sense of vitality to the alchemical sugar mill on display.

The immersive soundscape meant to evoke breath, was accompanied by the sound of liquid dripping and gurgling which emanated from the rum-like fluid that flowed through one of the glass sculpture’s pipes and reservoirs. As Campos-Pons relays:“When you arrive here and you hear the sound of the distilling of the rum, you even sense the kind of humidity, that captured the sort of experience that I remember when I was younger...I used to say, before I come back to La Vega that the smell of burning sugar and processing sugar stay in your nose, enter your brain, and never left you” (Quoted in Shea). While Campos-Pons attempts to recreate an atmosphere she remembers intimately, the artist is cognizant of the field of representation her work is enmeshed in. “When we are here [in the installation] we could say to you, ‘Welcome to Cuba, but it’s an artifice of Cuba " (Quoted in Shea). An artifice, an artful skill often associated with trickery, could underscore the constructedness of what Cuba *is* or *means* in relation to a site of exhibition in New England. The artist, for example, chose to include burlap sugar sacks inside the freight elevator—visual, tangible markers of the primary product historically (re)produced by Cuba and exported to the U.S. As Fernando Ortiz (1945) might have argued in *Cuban Counterpoint,* Cuba, as *Doña Azúcar* —the mass (re)producer of sugar—became increasingly reliant on her exports to her North American neighbor in the first part of the 20th century and, at the risk of losing her sovereignty, gave her sweet offerings quite cheaply to U.S.-based *Sir Capital.* Cuba, as the stand in for sugar and in relation to capitalist forces residing in the states, is reduced to the gendered and raced

dimensions associated with passivity and willing exploitation. To taste/consume Cuba, as sugar has historically been tasted/consumed, is to reduce the sense of Cuba to a “sweet” product, an artifice, a crafty device of commerce.

Campos-Pons, while hinting at the construct of Cuba, as symbolized by what Ortiz hailed as the “lowly” sugar sack, pairs this product of bitter sweetness with glass sculptures that act as apparatuses of distillation for the sounds of rumba, the fermenting smell of sugar turning into rum, and the sticky feeling of humidity released from that process that reminds the artist of her experiences in Cuba. As Campos Pons comments further, the artifice allows the public to consider “What is Cuba? The role of sugar? The role of rum? The role of art? Our relation to it? Our relation to Cuba?” (Quoted in Shea)—questions that are connected to her efforts to share memories that have left an indelible mark on her. As Basseches in the exhibition catalogue concisely describes: “[*Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*] is both a reflection of a process drawn from memory and a seminal example of the artist's preoccupation with it: the materiality of memory, the distortion of memory, the fragility of memory, the vulnerability of memory” (Part 5). The senses activated by Campos-Pons direct the public to a spirit of Cuba that, like memories, are difficult to see, to understand, to grasp clearly.

Like Glissant (1990) who argued for the “right to opacity,” which constitutes an important part of his poetics of relation, the transparency driven act of ‘comprehension’ (*comprendre*), of grasping, is essentially an act of appropriation. To “grasp” as Glissant interprets, is “the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves”—a gesture that reduces comprehension to a point of view that while specific believes itself to be universal and to a gesture that reduces understanding to an act of possession (190,191). Rather he proposes that the act of understanding could be driven by a different impulse. The gesture he proposes is one of giving-on-and-with that directs us

towards a multitude of meanings that perhaps one might never come to clearly understand, like the feelings stirred by a memory that someone else shares with you. Memory is never a reliable narrator, but it is a reliable provocateur of feeling. The artifice of Cuba Campos-Pons (re)presents is distilled from memories that disrupt sense-less objectifying constructs, and gesture towards an inexplicable feeling, a spirit, a sense driven engagement with Cuba that exceeds simple rationale and shatters reductive presumptions.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: THE ART OF DIFFRACTION

Comprised of blown and cast glass, steel, resin, silicone, acrylic, polyvinyl chloride tubing, water, and rum essence, the most visible elements of *Alchemy of The Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* are six blown glass sculptural pieces that appear like industrial silhouettes. The sculptures were inspired by the decaying sugar mills that populate La Vega, as the artist relates: “Over the years we have seen these ghostly structures in the Cuban landscape, and the idea for this piece was born on the road, seeing fragments in the distance, just fragments.” (Quoted in Sharp). Hundreds of now defunct, decaying sugar operations remain scattered throughout Cuba’s countryside (Sharp). The materials the artist employed to create the individual structures, however, are not the dilapidated, rusted metal beams that remain from those abandoned mills. Rather, they are bulbous forms that are made largely out of transparent and colored glass in translucent rum-colored brown, gelatin yellow, chalcedony pink, and luminous crystal-clear blue (Shea). While the visual references evoke industry, Campos-Pons also employs color and organic, anatomical imagery. The glass containers meant to hold sugar or rum during industrial distillation are supported by delicately curved legs, blending insect like forms with the efficient, rigid lines of industrial design. Further discussing her impressions of the “fragments” in the Cuban countryside Campos-Pons states: “For me it’s the commentary about the ruins, the commentary about the ghosts” (Quoted in Shea). Campos-Pons (accompanied by a soundscape and the sticky humidity produced from

the distillation of rum essence meant to evoke breath) represents the ghostly presence, i.e., the spirit(s) of an abandoned/ruinous industry by representing the distillation of sugar in anatomical, colored glass receptacles. By calling to mind yet not reproducing the original forms, the artist revitalizes remnants of a landscape representative of decay.

Five of these industrial/anatomical sculptural elements resided in one room while one stood alone in another exhibition space surrounded by six other major works that Campos-Pons created between 2008 and 2009 (Basseches Part 4). These include figurative large-scale, photo-based works along with watercolor paintings and a mixed-media construction. The artist's body is central in these pieces, and they could be thought of as a continuum of her tradition of self-portraiture and the investigation of identity found in much of her work from the 1990s. The selection for this installation, however, frequently depict the artist from the back as if the figure is walking away from the eye of the beholder as in *Blue Refuge*, 2008, *Thinking of It*, 2008, and *Dreaming of an Island*, 2008. Considering this shift, the artist comments:

> The work that I did in the '90s, just about the time that I left Cuba, put an incredible focus and emphasis on the issue of identity, the body, the location of the body within the discourse of feminism, within the discourse of race, and the discourse of translation of location, of cultural construct. And the work was very much figurative; the body was very much at the center as an important place. I believe at this moment, it has kind of [been] pushed aside. (Quoted in Basseches Part 4)

Her artistic interest in the body, and particularly the Black body, however, has not diminished; it has found new modes of expression. The selection of art works that complement the glass sculptures, many of which depict the extension of the artist's hair as a connector between different spaces and places, could be thought of as a bridge that documents this shift from the performativity of the body to the performativity of materials

like sugar. Sugar, which brought about the cultural collisions that Cuba and Campos-Pons are partially a product of, is a material, a matter that narrativizes a collective story. That story is not only the story of Campos-Pons' ancestors who were captured or coerced to toil on sugar cane fields in Cuba, it is also a story of all the "spirits" that created the wealth but have never been valued in the (re)production of sugar and rum. Centering the materiality of sugar, rather than the body, enables the beholder to interrogate how the production of this sweet commodity racially marked those forced to cultivate it, while alleviating the racially-marked body from scopic reduction. Centering the materiality of sugar also provides a path towards understanding how this product of misery was/is also a source of cultural production.

As Campos-Pons says: "Of merging ideas, merging of ethnicities, merging of traditions... I am as much Black, Cuban, woman, Chinese. I am this tapestry of all of that, and the responses to that could be very complicated and could include even anguish and pain " (Quoted in Lewis-Cappellari). Yet, this painful story is one that Campos-Pons has invested much of her artistic career in engaging. As she writes, "I…collect and tell stories of forgotten people in order to foster a dialogue to better understand and propose a poetic, compassionate reading of our time" (Quoted in Gallery Wendi Norris). Campos-Pons further relays that *Alchemy of the Soul Elixir for the Spirits* "is a distillation of the concept of the idea of the body" and an interest, as she furthers, in "the economy of form " (Quoted in Basseches Part 4). In this installation we see the artist once again gravitate towards glass to distill ideas and concepts of bodies and traditions born on Cuban soil as a result of the production of sugar. While *Sugar/ Bittersweet* focused on the materiality of glass and real sugar to attend to/ cultivate a plot historically divested of care, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* centers the materiality of glass as an aperture for "seeing" and a container that temporarily holds the spirit(s) of sugar, the immaterial bodies that Campos Pons would like to direct the public's attention towards.

The glass reservoirs in *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* conjure industrial sized vessels of distillation. They also conjure vessels in alchemical/scientific experiments. In *The Alchemy of Glass: Counterfeit, Imitation, and Transmutation in Ancient Glassmaking* (2020), Marco Beretta explores the ancient origins of the connection between glassmaking and alchemy. The discovery of glass as an effective material for distillation led the field of alchemy and early chemical science to a whole series of discoveries. [22] As Beretta argues throughout the book, innovations in glassmaking techniques redefined perspectives on the nature of matter while inspiring the alchemical theory of transmutation. The attempt to replicate precious stones had been from its inception a goal of glassmaking. The successful production of colored glass to create "gems," Beretta contends, can be considered in relation to the study and practice of alchemy to transmute base metals into gold. If glassmakers could form replicas indistinguishable from nature using artificial means, then it was not a far stretch to theorize how alchemy could create "natural" materials through transmutation. In addition, Beretta demonstrates how in ancient cultures glass held high economic value often surpassing the value of gold as glass imitations of gems would elicit high prices–a result of the quality of the illusion. Value attributed to such an artificially produced material was possible because a distinction between nature and art was blurred. Beretta quotes Aeneas of Gaza, a Platonic philosopher of the fifth century A.D., as an example of how glass and alchemy were connected: "There is nothing incredible about the metamorphosis of matter into a superior state. In this manner those versed in the art of matter take silver and tin, change their appearance, and transmute them into excellent gold. Glass is manufactured from divisible sand and dissoluble natron, and thus becomes a novel and brilliant thing" (108–109).

[22] "As a kind of artificial stone with peculiar properties, glass has attracted the attention of craftspeople and natural philosophers from prehistoric times; at the same time, the need for transparent, strong, and stable glassware of peculiar shapes for laboratory reactions is likely to have triggered important developments in glass technology" (Veronesi and Martinón-Torres 2018).

The transformation of "ordinary" sand into "superior" glass provided visible proof that glassmaking was/is the practical application of the theory of transmutation.

The alchemical reference for Campos-Pons gem-coloured vessels–designed to assemble and hold spirit(s) distilled from sugarcane–most closely resemble the glass reservoirs in Remedios Varo's painting *Creación de las Aves (Creation of the Birds,* 1957). In the painting an owl-like feminine figure is seated beside an alchemical distillation vessel that is connected by tubes and pipes to an unknown source. The fluids are being distilled into paint which the figure is using to draw birds onto a canvas with one hand. With the other hand the figure holds a triangular looking glass that is diffracting the light of the stars to bring those birds to life. In the painting, Varo's owl-like protagonist (part alchemist, part artist, part scientist, and part magician) is giving life to inert matters through the art of (re)production (the birds which are drawn from the paint distilled from the alchemical vessels in the laboratory) and through the physics of diffraction (the prism of light emanating from the looking glass that appears to animate the birds). The painting, like Campos-Pons' glass renderings, could be considered a comment on how acts of creation come to matter depending upon the lens/aperture/apparatus through which they are being observed/measured/judged.

Karen Barad (2007) proposes a metaphor of inquiry in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, informed by the physics of diffraction rather than reflection. [23] In physics, reflection refers to waves bouncing off an obstacle. Therefore, reflection as a metaphor of inquiry mirrors reality—an act of "objective" representation. In physics diffraction connotes the bending and spreading of waves when they encounter a barrier. Diffraction, as a metaphor of inquiry, therefore, involves attending to patterns of interference that do not produce a mirror image—an illusion of separation between subject and object—but rather produces

[23] The behaviour of waves (light, sound, or water) when they encounter a boundary.

differing patterns that result from encounters.[24] As Barad writes: "we can understand diffraction patterns – as patterns of difference that make a difference – to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world" (72). In reflection, the emphasis is on what is reoccurring, or what is the same, whereas diffraction attends to interferences and differences that are enacted in the "specific material configurations of the world's becoming" (91).

Diffractive thinking complements Barad's relational ontology and her theories surrounding the performativity of matter which are most directly influenced by findings from experiments with subatomic particles and what she calls the "onto-epistemology" of quantum physicist Niels Bohr. When experiments began to be made in this area, physicists were confounded as they could not figure out how subatomic particles (which in Newtonian or classical physics are things in themselves) sometimes acted like waves, and sometimes acted like particles. What Bohr, ultimately, was able to prove is how this finding undoes the distinction between the observer and observed, as apparatuses (understood as concept and tool of measurement) don't only determine what we know but also "what can be said to *be*." Separate entities "things" don't exist. Apparatuses of observation are no longer passive observing instruments as in the classical paradigm; rather, they are part of and productive of the phenomena. Diffraction, "as patterns of difference that make a difference," is not unlike the thought experiment inspired by Glissant's optical metaphor of opacity, which leads him towards a gesture that refutes grasping (an act of "transparent" reflection) and towards one that gives on with (an act of "multiplicitous" diffraction) thereby sparking new paths of inquiry into matters thought objectively/reductively knowable. Varo's painting depicts the idea of diffraction pictorially. The diffractive light that emanates from the triangular looking glass inspirits the birds in the painting providing them a line of flight from their two-

[24] Donna Haraway (1997) who first articulated the notion of diffraction as a critical method writes "where inference patterns can make a difference in how meanings are made and lived" (p. 14).

dimensional "objective" representation. The lens, the aperture of viewing, has enabled them to matter differently.

The optical references, the apparatuses of seeing, whether through the looking glass in Varo's painting or through the gem-like glass receptacles in Campos-Pons' installation are there to guide the beholder to the spirit of materiality. Or, in other words, to the entanglement/inseparability of matter and meaning which could be thought of in relation to Alejo Carpentier's aesthetic theory of *lo real marvilloso.* In the preface to his novel, *The Kingdom of this World* (*El reino de este mundo*), Carpentier explains how his stories were inspired by the marvelous phenomena of reality which he first experienced during his 1943 visit to Haiti. Within the broader context of the Caribbean, he found *lo real maravilloso* in mundane everyday activities, in indigenous beliefs, in the extremes and wonders of nature, and in cultural/religious syncretic practices, as Carpentier explains:

> That which is marvelous begins to be so, unequivocally, when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), [... …] from a rare illumination [... …] of an unnoticed richness of reality. [… …] To begin with, the perception of the marvelous assumes faith on it. Those who do not believe in saints cannot be cured by saints' miracles [… …] That is why the marvelous based in the non-belief ─as done by the Surrealists for so many years─never can be more than a boring literary cunning. (xvi)

That "rare illumination" could be thought of as a diffractive act. In *Sentient Flesh* (2020) R.A. Judy, who is interested in disrupting/overturning the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological underpinnings that have created the conditions of possibility for anti-blackness in the modern world, further elaborates on Carpentier's aesthetic proposal: "Even as a matter of aesthetics, or rather especially as a matter of aesthetics, the marvelous must stem from a thinking investment—Carpentier calls it *faith,* which can be taken to mean

what we might call a-epistemic knowledge and thinking—in a reality in which spirits, malevolent and beneficial, as well as saints and their miracles, actually exist" (11).
Like the alchemist who matter-of-factly believes in the brilliance of glass, *lo real marvilloso* requires the practice of recognizing the "spirit" of things in everyday matters. It is a thinking investment that is not based on western Humanism's empirical drive to "see" and grasp something objectively—an act that denies difference by projecting one perspective as universal which imposes a reasoning practice based on a sense-less hierarchy of being. *Lo real marvilloso,* which can only be considered by thinking diffractively, rather proposes a sensorial investment that exceeds and confounds such reductive objectifying practices.

A foundational principle in Sylvia Wynter's (1992) writing on the aesthetic realm, is that representations matter as they give us a sense of what matters. Or as Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021) have written: "To toil within or rail against the field of representation is already to be enmeshed in the aesthetic, for it is by way of the aesthetic that the ontological ground on which we are said to stand becomes experience." The role then of engaging the aesthetic realm, which Wynter reconstitutes as an act of decipherment rather than critique, is to question the totalizing aesthetic regime that gets projected onto the world while also recognizing counter-hegemonic practices that disrupt universalizing perspectives. In other words, decipherment could be thought of as diffractive inquiry (an acknowledgement of difference-making practices) while critique could be thought of as an act of reflection (an act of reproduction).

As Ezekiel Dixon-Roman and Ramon Amaro (2021) discuss "Sylvia Wynter has already warned us that our contemporary conception of living value is preconditioned by humanist ideals of inter- and intraspecies hierarchy." Alchemy or art as an apparatus of decipherment not only reveals what a culture's value systems are but also that they are malleable. The potential of alchemy, like art, is in creating a transvaluation of values that

enables matters that have had little to no value–due to a cultural imaginary's sense-making practices–to matter. Therefore, the spirit at the heart of Campos Pons work, must be approached differently. If sight is what has been privileged to create a hierarchy of being based on the mark of raciality, where blackness defines the grounds of that hierarchy, then Campos-Pons's glass renderings—her alchemical laboratory that stands in for the ruins of the sugar industry—serve not to clarify but rather to mystify, i.e., to inspirit the materiality of sugar. In that disorienting site of visual dislocation there is an opportunity to see/feel/taste something that can never be grasped, there is, as Glissant proposed the possibility to "displace reduction" (190). Campos-Pons provides an aperture for seeing that disorients and thereby re-orients sugar's sense of value. The ruins of the sugar industry, the countless lives thought disposable that were senselessly lost throughout sugar's (re)production are the spirit of the work, which Campos-Pons the artist and alchemist insists have value.

In an interview in response to a question about how her practice draws on rituals and rites which evoke the figures and deities of Santería, Campos-Pons relays:

> Those works are informed by childhood memories and dreams. Most of my work evolves from dreams. I want to be a "visual healer," I want to allow people to encounter an experience that allows them to ask a question or open a conversation. There is privilege in having people's attention for any given space of time, and I want to give back a gift to every viewer. I try my best to carry some truth in my accounts. Every time I start a new piece, I am in pain and almost afraid—I gather all of my courage to show my dreams and observations to others. I want to help people to see more. I ask for forgiveness for believing that my work can do just that. (Quoted in catalog Notes on Sugar, 11)

If the sugar mill, as I argued in the context of *Sugar/Bitterweet*, functioned historically as an apparatus for naturalizing a racial-spatial order of being predicated on deadening matters to

preserve whiteness as a product that profited whiteness, then Campos-Pons' ghostly (re)production of a sugar mill produces an atmosphere that cannot be contained by such logics. Spirits, rather reinforce that they exist as they haunt and or enliven environments. They also can't be seen; they must be felt. By creating multi-sensorial aesthetic experiences that disrupt visually reductive acts of consumption, i.e., racial tasting, Campos-Pons, the visual healer, enacts a form of alchemy that enables another way of knowing/being/feeling in the world. *Sugar/Bittersweet* and *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* demonstrate that alchemy occurs when the senses are attuned to the vitality of materiality; a different orientation of value—a practice that when deployed reorients tastes for an ingredient that has turned bodies and sites into ruins and towards a vibrant energy source that has, and could, when acknowledged, inspirit practices like art making.

AFTERWORD
The Cutting

John Locke (2022) in his 1689 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* once assessed the universalizing perceptual power of sugar when he wrote, "If sugar produce in us the ideas which we call whiteness and sweetness, we are sure there is a power in sugar to produce those ideas in our mind." The drive to understand how one comes to perceive, orient, and experience themselves in the world, stems from my interest in how sugar has contributed to such sweetened/whitened perceptual orientations and investments. The artists, art works, and site-specific landscapes featured in this dissertation have provided me with an opportunity to delve into the ways sugar refined from cane—an ingredient of mass production and global consumption—has conditioned racial meaning making. Applying a Black Caribbean materialist approach, I have attempted to write a critical poetics of sugar that questions sugar's ruinous affects/effects in conditioning "sweet" racializing gustatory/aesthetic sense-abilities that get naturalized and refined along a "black" and "white" color continuum, while also exploring how sugar has been a (re)source of Black cultural production that forefronts alternative preferences, i.e., taste(s), not predicated on/dictated by visually reductive, racializing practices of consumption.

Thematically the chapters have reflected varying phases of sugarcane's (re)production and consumption to address how gustatory/aesthetic tastes have been constituted in relation to this energy source and ingredient. Chapter One, for example, questioned the "sweetness" of sugar by following the (re)appearance of a raced, gendered, and sexualized "sugar woman." The chapter primarily focused on the materialization of Kara Walker's 35 by 75 ft. sugarcoated mammy/jezebel (displayed on the floor of a former Domino refining factory in Brooklyn) as the work strikingly reflects how sugar—that circulates in a political economy/ontology designed to profit from racial differentiation— contributes to myths and dominant scripts that enable the agreeable/sweet consumption of raciality. By interrogating

representations of sugar, I argued that habitual, visually reductive acts of pleasurable consumption, which I coin as acts of racial tasting, are enabled by and have enabled the sweet consumption of bitter material realities reaped from the historical (re)production of sugar.

Chapter two focused on how bones, an essential part of sugar's whitening process, also haunt, unsettle, and disrupt that aesthetic orientation. Here I featured a dollhouse made of sugar crafted by the artist Sula Bermúdez- Silverman that centers the myth and history of the Haitian zombie—a figure representative of unending servitude that continues to generate wealth for a system designed to profit from deadening labor practices. I brought Bermúdez-Silverman's candied construct, haunted by the living dead, in dialogue with the recent unearthing of ninety-three men, one woman, and a child of African descent who were buried in unmarked graves as a result of the convict leasing system deployed to produce sugar in the Houston suburb of Sugar Land, Texas. The chapter questioned how constructs/structures predicated on aspirational notions of refined whiteness are "sweetly" reproduced and preserved, but also unsettled by their material (re)production and argued that the ideologies and technologies historically deployed to make sugar appear white and sweet continue to support and shape racialized orientations in the city of Sugar Land today. I also considered how the bones, the remains found in unmarked graves now memorialized as the Sugar Land 95, are actively disrupting, and unsettling such whitened/sweetened orientations.

Chapter three featured two installations by María Magdalena Campos-Pons that distill and preserve the spirit of sugar, an ingredient that brought her ancestors to the shores of Cuba. This chapter delved into the ways Campos-Pons centers the often overlooked and undervalued histories of her ancestors by enacting a labor practice that alchemizes sugar into a work of art— the process of making bringing care-filled attention to the difficulty and skill required to cultivate sugar while conjuring the spirits that enliven her artistic practice. While gustatory and aesthetic orientations cultivated by the mass (re)production and consumption of

sugar under a regime of racial capitalism appear in all the chapters as acts of racial tasting, the artworks featured are also indicative of Campos-Pons alchemical strategy as they (re)conceptualize how unconsidered faculties of taste have the potential of disrupting and potentially broadening gustatory/aesthetic orientations not reliant on racializing perceptual orientations.

As I discuss the repercussions of how the taste of/for sugar have been and can be cultivated and consumed throughout the dissertation, I have yet to more meaningfully address how the violence enacted on black(ened) bodies, in shockingly literal terms, parallels the manual harvesting of sugarcane still today. Future study should, therefore, delve into the ways cane cutting continues to engender acts of graphic racial violence. *Ayiti,* which became the first plot in the "New World" where sugar cane and bodies marked as black for its cultivation were forcefully uprooted and (re)planted in the "new world" is a site that on a political, social, cultural, and economic level continues to invest in the 'refined' whiteness associated with sugar production in the context of the Dominican Republic and Haiti today. Future scholarship, therefore, could turn to how sugar continues to cultivate tastes—the whitened aspirations and anti-Black orientations—on this plot. Here aesthetic symbols of Black labor and white sugar express the ways people have come to be racially identified, marked, and targeted along this color continuum. By focusing on the harvesting of sugarcane the study could conceptually follow the (re)appearance of the "sugar woman" in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Thematically driven by the performance of racial terror carried out during the Parsley Massacre of 1937, nationally known as *el corte* (the cutting), future on-site research could interrogate how sugarcane harvesting continues to be associated with "guest" migration laborers from Haiti in the Dominican Republic today.

THE CUTTING

While anti-Haitian rhetoric and governmental policies have, for decades, been central to Caribbean scholarship, as Lorgia Garcia Peña (2013) notes, especially in the U.S. "scholarly work about the island often focuses on what has become known as "the Haiti-Dominican problem," which juxtaposes Haiti and the Dominican Republic as enemies, the latter nation deemed as the oppressor of the former" (57, 58). The 1937 massacre is one of the events U.S. scholars have most studied, especially after the public visibility garnered from the publication of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (Peña 58). I agree, with Peña that it is vital to acknowledge the complexity of the island and its borders beyond the history of racial violence that separates the two nations, as well as the complicity of the West, particularly the foreign policy initiatives of the U.S. and France in helping to construct and foster that history and narrative of violence (Torres-Saillant, 1998). Yet to my knowledge, there has not been a performance study analysis on the role sugar played in animating the catastrophic event called *el corte* because of the way Dominican soldiers indiscriminately cut Black bodies in the same manner as the cane (Danticat 312,313) —a traumatic, violent occurrence that to date has never been officially recognized nor memorialized by the Dominican government.[2] Drawing from performance scholars like Robin Bernstein (2009) who examines the capacity of materials to "script" racializing behavior, and Rustom Bharucha (2014) who questions if the act of killing creates national identities, future scholarship could explore the ways sugar cane continues to "script" state sanctioned performances of racial terror.

The Parsley Massacre of 1937 in several ways was designed to assert where Haitians would be permitted to exist without fear of racial violence. Maria Cristina Fumagalli (2015) for example, describes how:

[2] There is an annual commemoration of the massacre in the border city of Dajabon called Border of Lights, organized by a group of international scholars and activists, including many Dominicans and Haitian-Americans. See their website: https://borderoflights.org/

> Haitian cane cutters, who, according to some sources, represented more than 40 per cent of the Haitians who resided in the country, were spared by the killers because, at the time, most of the sugar cane plantations and *bateyes* belonged to North Americans and the regime did not consider it prudent to antagonize foreign investors and the United States. Moreover, the braceros of the *bateyes* were fairly isolated from the rest of the population and therefore did not really represent a huge threat to what Trujillo and his supporters promoted as the 'authentic' Dominican way of life. Overall, therefore, as Martínez has eloquently put it, 'regardless of the dictator's intentions, no more chilling way could be imagined of conveying to Haitian immigrants that the sugar *bateyes* would thereafter be the only secure place on Dominican soil'; braceros, in fact, continued to come to the Dominican Republic in substantial numbers also immediately after the massacre. (172)

Part of the threat to an "authentic" Dominican way of life was the fear that Black miscegenation might thwart the strategy of *blanqueamiento* which had been one of Truilljo's—himself the grandson of a Haitian grandmother—most fervent national ideals (Fumagalli 157). During the regime of Trujillo, the political strategy of *blanqueamiento* was aimed to develop, maintain, and preserve a pigmentocracy in which social status correlated with skin color and phenotype, and it determined the type of migration the Dominican Republic was willing to accept and even encouraged. For example, a year after *el corte*, the Dominican Republic was one of the few countries willing to accept large-scale Jewish immigration before and during World War II. At the Evian Conference on refugees, organized by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1938, the Dominican Republic offered to accept up to 100,000 Jewish refugees (Margolis 2018). Fleeing from fascism's racial/ethnic ideals Jewish migration was welcomed as a path towards a fascist's dream to whiten/refine the Dominican population. Still today many Dominicans continue to hold strong anti-Haitian

attitudes, and negative views of Blackness, beauty, and social propriety still pervade in Dominican popular discourse. In a country where much of the population is of African descent, too many Dominicans don't acknowledge, in this "racial democracy" (that overwhelmingly discriminates based on phenotype) that racial discrimination exists within the population, and how sugarcane production in the country continues to cultivate such aesthetic orientations.

Persisting perceptual associations between sugar cane and the Haitian/Black laboring body could also be studied by looking at works by artists like David Pérez—specifically *Trata* from 2005. *Trata*, a reference to the slave trade in Spanish, is a durational performance where the artist attempts to consume five hundred sugar cane stalks peeled by a Haitian sugarcane worker at one of the most visited historical sites in the Dominican Republic. The performance underscores the violent, nauseating repercussions of the 'sweet' consumption of historically exploited labor. In part—as Pérez begins to visually get sick from his attempt at mass consumption —it elucidates what Kyla Tompkins (2012) coins as the repercussions of "racial indigestion," i.e., those acts of consumption that "do not go down smoothly" by actively resisting the "capitalist logic of racism and slavery" (8). In other words, the notion of "racial indigestion" gestures towards the disruption of the easy, pleasurable consumption of taste(s) cultivated by dominant racial scripts.

IN CONCLUSION

Tasting entails multisensory encounters and integrations with materialities immersed in historical and discursive practices that condition our perceptions and orient our embodied experiences. How sugar arrives and appears before me, entails a process of refining that at times masks bitter materialities—as sugar continues to be tethered to violent practices of racialization. This calls for further investigations into how the taste of sugar takes on moral, gendered, classed, *and* raced dimensions. How and what we taste contributes to worldviews

and ways of life, and as I have argued throughout this dissertation, depending on how we taste, race can taste seductively sweet, or sweetness a sense-ability that if cultivated differently could disrupt and alter logics based on sense-less hierarchies of being/knowing/feeling.

While this dissertation has explored how perceptions of sugar have sweetened a racial order of being that privileges whiteness at the expense of those black(ened) to (re)produce it, it has also explored some of the ways this ingredient has been alchemized, enabling sensorial orientations not dictated by "sweet" racializing practices. Deeply moved by Campos-Pons's alchemical strategy this study is informed by what it could/might mean to work towards alternative orientations—a sweet exodus from gustatory and aesthetic tastes habituated by sugar's overconsumption that have produced such horrifying material affects/effects. I refer again to the two connotations of alchemy: one is to procure wealth, and the other to enrich health to prolong life. The alchemy of sugar into an ingredient that fuels life-preserving practices could be enacted if we alternatively taste sugar, not as an ingredient of/for sweetening and enabling racial consumption, but as a vibrant energy source that can nourish equitably more pleasurable and ecologically more sustainable reciprocal relations.

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