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‘Those that resemble flies from a distance’: Performing Research

‘Those that resemble flies from a distance’ is a line from a Jorge Luis Borges essay (1964). With the artifice of academic prose, the essay jousts with philosopher John Wilkins’s proposals for a universal (colonial) language of representation. It is best known for its spoof Chinese encyclopedia, the ‘Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge’. Laying out a fantastical taxonomy of critters and creatures, based on a pseudo-reference to the work of German sinologist Franz Kuhn, the Emporium’s categories span across, ‘belonging to the emperor,’ ‘stray,’ ‘frenzied,’ ‘drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’ and ‘those that resemble flies from a distance’ (p.103). For Michel Foucault what stood out about the Emporium was not so much the exotic strangeness of the cosmology but how it illuminated the narrowness of modern Western thought, ‘the stark impossibility of thinking *that*’ (1988/2002: xv, emphasis in the original).

At this time of febrile anti-migrant sentiment, insects and vermin are common tropes for populations of exile and insurgent mobility (see Sharpe 2016: 15), circling relentlessly in the high-octane hate speech of politicians, journalists and in vernacular racism. At times it feels as if acknowledging migrants and involuntary exiles as fully human is a ‘stark impossibility’. For some feminist, critical race and black studies scholars, the recognition of the humanity of the stranger made into an object of hatred, fear and terror demands a dissident imagining and the assembling of counter-archives and narratives alert to the continuing im/material over-spill of

slavery and imperial racism in contemporary geopolitical life (see Campt 2017; Eshun 2003; Hartman 1997; Mbembe 2017; Sharpe 2016).

Such concerns overlap with conversations about creating different forms of thought, ethics and knowing to dismantle the enduring colonial and racial legacies of methodological and knowledge economies (see Gunaratnam 2003). 'The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism', Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts, 'remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that offends the deepest sense of our humanity' (1999: 1).

With these discussions in mind, I take up and read together the figure of the fly from Borges and as it surfaces in the poet Aracelis Girmay's 2016 collection 'the black maria'. Girmay's volume is a stunning elegy, interweaving Eritrean history with the imperiled latter-day journeys of those Eritreans trying to make their way across treacherous seas from North Africa to Europe. The stories are told through four female Luams ('Luam means 'peaceful' & 'restful' in Tigrinya', 2016:11). The youngest Luam is a nine-year girl, a descendent of a slave abducted in the early 1700s. The others are women all aged thirty-six: one born in Asmara and making her life as a cleaner in Perugia; another is in New York, where she was born and lives as a school teacher and poet. The fourth Luam is a nurse in Asmara. For the Luams, Girmay writes, 'there are no angels, only flies':

About the flies Luams say: The fly is bright & working. It carries

messages of hunger & sentences of the wound. It cannot carry the message without, itself, being touched. The fly whose hands & feet touch death, bring death to where it lands. Out of doors, it carries the history of the wound, disobeying the locks on doors and screens. The flies, they are the honest who know their history & take it everywhere. (p.11)

The fly as a laboring, interfering witness touched by death is an evocative figure for a migrant and racially minoritised feminist researcher, moving between the worlds of transnational living and death. (I take the experiential 'honesty' of Girmay's fly as an ethical aspiration and struggle). Unlike an intermediary, which for Bruno Latour (2005:39) 'transports meaning or force without transformation', Girmay's flies conjure the ethical, methodological and fleshy role of researchers as 'mediators'. Mediators, as Latour imagines them, 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry' (p.39).

In the method of empirical performance that I present here, the mediating/interfering work of the researcher as fly is amplified in the creative synthesis of empirical materials into dramatic performances. Choosing materials, developing a script with scenes, protagonists, storylines and performance media does more than reanimate 'data'. If she chooses to adventure with her empirical materials, to accept 'an invitation to create and imagine' (Despret, 2018: 65), the method can yield new discoveries, including intensified proximity to the meeting

points and disjunctures of the different collective formations that the researcher mediates.

Before you read on, take a break from theory and the text. Think about a fly. What sort of fly is it? What does a fly make you feel? If there is a fly in the place where you are reading this, go take a closer look and listen. Register your feelings and thoughts.

Knowing differently

The empirical paths to researching diasporic dying are relatively untrodden, the methodological ground uneven. I started my postgraduate research some two decades ago, using fairly standardised qualitative methods. I can't remember any black or brown feminist, queer or disability resources in my methods training. I often felt alone and lost, improvising my way around and through the cracks and ravines of enlightenment legacies that haunt social science methods. This includes the expectation that we should know in advance what methods are a best fit for a project.

My experiments with method, initially writing stories and poetry, led to incremental, often haphazard 'methods assemblages'; a term coined by sociologist John Law (2004). An aspect of Law's methods assemblage that spoke to me is the recognition of the flows between the 'in-here' of a researcher's subjectivity and the 'out-there' of the partial networks of connections of which we are a part, as 'we, bundle together not very coherent but nevertheless structured hinterlands' (p. 68-9).

The nature of this bundling, as well as the hinterlands of research, has different facets and histories in the work of researching race and its interanimations. Petal Samuel (2018, n.p.) has observed how black studies scholars have had to invent new genres and forms of method and knowledge, 'learning to interpret gaps in the archive; working between and across disciplines; and reading beneath the story that's told for the untold story.' Because slavery, indenture and colonialism have decimated cultural cosmologies and archives, Samuel believes, 'Hearsay, rumor, experimentation, and other forms of speculation have become the bases of innovative methodologies that open up new paths for thinking about black histories and futures.'

In making more explicit this politics of knowing and researching differently in the context of feminist new materialism's exploration of bodies and matter, my interest is in what Renold and Mellor (2013: 25) have framed as attentiveness to how 'subjectivity is extended into a range of different 'universes', beyond the individual and towards a collective and connected affective assemblage of other bodies and things' (reference in quote omitted). While Renold and Mellor are referring to a 'Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of becoming' (p.25), concern with the attenuations of subjectivity into larger networks is a vibrant seam in black and diasporic fiction (for examples see Butler 1988/1979; Danticat 2015/1994; Morrison 1987) and in feminist of colour research (Cho 2008; De Alwis 2009; Hartman 1997). To show what trying to decipher and trace this connectedness can entail, I will draw on empirical performances that feature the dance between disease-impaired subjectivity and what has been respectively called 'black' (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017) and

'brown' (Muñoz 2018) mattering: that is, how socially sculpted forms of race making can impress themselves into matter and how matter can elude and exceed racialisation. I will elaborate on these discussions later on. At this point I want to highlight the work of José Esteban Muñoz as speaking to my interest in the moving currents between diseased bodies, things, racialisation and migration. Muñoz writes brownness like this:

...first and foremost I mean brown as in brown people in a very immediate way, people who are rendered brown by their personal or familial participation in south-to-north migration patterns. I am also thinking of people who are brown by way of accents and linguistic orientations that convey a certain difference. I mean a brownness that is conferred by the ways in which one's spatial coordinates are contested, the ways in which one's right to residency is challenged by those who make false claims to nativity. (Muñoz 2018: 396)

In the empirical performances that you will watch, my brown feminist materialist attunements appear as points of interference (as flies) in the reworking of empirical materials. The performances put into play various possible relations between the contexts, processes and energies that can infuse diasporic dying. With this reworking, I typically draw from interviews and ethnographic observations of dying people and family and professional carers (see Gunaratnam 2013). The performances are also based on my research of different diseases, the dying process and the treatment of end of life conditions in medical literature, so that the medical

details are in a realist mode, recognizable (I hope) to care professionals and family carers.

My aim has been to open up propositions about the singular and collective interanimations between disease and histories and events of black and brown mattering. In this sense, the performances present what Bell and Paolantonio (2017) refer to, via the work of Stengers (2005), as ‘candidates for truth’ (p.574). Bell and Paolantonio’s analysis recognises how a researcher’s methods constitute, ‘forms of “putting in relation” and arguments about relevance—to gather and persuade...audiences’ (p.593). I have been interested in how empirical performance might ‘persuade’ audiences away from over-determined racial and culturalist interpretations, while encouraging thinking about the mattering, or not, of colonialism, racism and capitalist exploitation in diasporic dying.

What feminist new materialism has to offer this work of ‘putting in relation’ is more offbeat ways of “noticing”...different kinds of things that might be happening, or things that might be happening differently’ (Coleman and Ringrose 2013: 4). Some of what I have noticed and tuned into more closely is the sensuous play of bodies and how matter can be generative even at the end of life, when social differences can be variously animated by, as well as passed-over, undone and shuffled by bio-chemical changes. What is challenging in attuning to matter is making sense of what is going on between the sensible and the politically intelligible, the present and the barely there or vanished. This is where the materialist conversations in feminist, queer, critical race and black studies have made a difference.

The short performance 'Fields' that follows is an example of the empirical performance method that dramatises an interview with Harshini whose mother Nirmala had dementia. Dementia is a generic term for brain diseases that impair memory, cognition, language and problem solving. Fields is the first part of a longer film 'Two Sighs' (2013), produced in collaboration with the theatre company Tamasha. The film includes another performed story and a poem that I scripted for a British Academy¹ funded project called 'Case Stories' (2013—14) on social pain and suffering.

Discussions of social suffering—the 'problems that result from what political, economic and institutional power does to people' (Kleinman, Das and Lockwood 1997:ix), range across the social and human sciences. A shared focus is the struggle for, and for some writers the impossibility of, communicating these types of chronic, habituated injury (see Frost and Hoggett, 2008). There is a slow moving temporality to social suffering. 'It's one of those slow burning, accumulating types of hurt' I have suggested elsewhere. 'Like love, it doesn't have to be felt all at once or to come at you like a fireball' (Gunaratnam 2015: 1937).

Play 'Fields' and make a note of what you notice, the 'different kinds of things that might be happening, or things that might be happening differently' (Coleman and Ringrose 2013: 4).

Insert extract of film clip 'Fields' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5CAPtOi4r8>

Video Production by Tamasha, created by Clare Callan and Nye Williams

Fielding presence

There are a bunch of things going on in Fields. But there are a couple of matters relating to noncognitive circuits of touch and presence/absence that I'd like to focus in on (*you will have noticed other things, so keep these in mind*).

Fields is a story of loss. It's a rumination on the rearranging of thought, memory and faith told across the shifting tides of dementia relationships. With these losses in mind, I want to think about the stories of the mala (prayer) beads and Nirmala's wandering as insurgent 'switchpoints of bodily capacity' (Puar 2012: 150-1); a phrase used by Jasbir Puar to signify the body as a dynamic state of becoming, produced through changing matter, tendencies, compartments, elaborations, practices, affects and technologies. What is interesting about the bodily switchpoints conjured in the story is how Fields captures something of the excessiveness of objects and spaces as a part of the connective tissue of what Muñoz (2018: 395) has dubbed the 'Brown commons':

The Brown commons is not about the production of the individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse, to move beyond the singular and individualized subjectivities. It is about the swerve of matter, organic and otherwise, the moment of contact, the encounter and all that it can generate. (p.295)

The contours of a brown commons are all the more striking in the happening of diasporic dementia. The performed storying of the mala beads is brown in the sense that words, gestures and movement point to ‘the swerve of matter’ into bigger coordinates. The story enacts a sensuous ensemble and structures of affect in which objects and things appear as more than representations *of* an individual’s devotional practices. The habitual rhythms of demented fingers continue the more collectivised tactile movements of prayer *as* bodily devotion (see also Mahood 2009). And as fingers move across phantom beads, they are caught up in, but also adventure away from, the obdurate thing-ness of the beads. It becomes possible to pick up on the entwined pressing of flesh: how Nirmala’s fingers have shaped the beads and how they have shaped her to the point at which their materiality is superfluous.

There are also the space-time confusions of diasporic dementia in Fields, through which Nirmala travels across simultaneous but non-contiguous territories. She leaves a house in Leicestershire in the Midlands of England, telling Harshini that she is going to the fields. For Harshini these are the fields that bordered her mother’s rural village in India that she had left decades earlier, first for Uganda and then England.

With the swerve of matter and body storied by Harshini, two usually submerged or ineffable experiences are brought to light: subjectivity as a mode of travel and one in which the lived scales and strata of the local and the transnational are creatively produced and concatenated; and how objects come to be brown in the affects they gather and exude within collectivities. ‘...things are brown in that they radiate a different kind of affect.’, Muñoz writes, ‘Brown affect traverses the rhythmic spacing

between those singularities that compose the plurality of a brown commons.’

(p.396).

As an interfering fly, there’s another side to the dementia symptom of wandering that I have had to consider in writing the empirical performance for Fields. Might Nirmala’s ‘return’ to India in her wandering be related to her expulsion from Kenya in 1972 (as a result of decree by President Idi Amin, who accused the country’s South-Asian populations of disloyalty and non-integration) and her social and linguistic marginalisation in England? Could the wandering be driven, in part, by brown social suffering? Or am I over-reading oppression-related affects and agency into this diasporic story?

Over-reading

The question of over-reading has been a key point of debate in black studies on racialised bodily life (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017). Examining embodiment through the work of Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye has pointed to the corporeal power of ‘racializing assemblages’, whereby ‘violent political domination activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality’ (2014: 2). At the crux of these conversations is the differential intelligibility of black bodies that Spillers summarises in an often-quoted phrase as ‘a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh’, inscribed in plantatocracy in the Americas by ‘The smack of the whip’ (1987/2003: 207).

In a vibrant conversation with Katherine McKittrick on the 808 drum machine,

racialised gendering and ‘heart///break’, Weheliye expands on how he has synthesised the work of Wynter and Spillers (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017: 30). ‘The flesh is not merely inert violated matter but praxis incarnate’ writes Weheliye:

For me the term flesh conjures mattering movements in Black that resolutely defy the purely biocentric, precisely because of its complicated histories. At the same time, flesh provides openings for different formings and matterings beyond both Man and to some extent the human. My work continues to center the ungendered flesh of Black life as praxis. Living in, living with. Boom. (p.31)

‘Mattering movements in Black’, in similar ways to Muñoz’s ‘brown commons’ is full of dynamism. This is not a version of an ontology/biology as politics narrative, such as black bodies being determined by a radical alterity. Rather McKittrick and Weheliye (2017:36) seem to be marking out a provisional mode of ontological thinking, responsive to the gathering of the plurality and event of ‘black livingness’ in both its historical-then and situated-now human and non-human networks. Black flesh can be inscribed by biology and the social, but is also open to ‘different formings and matterings’ (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017: 31).

This sort of ontological thinking becomes more complicated when we are interested in mapping the effects of racism on Black and Brown bodies *and* moving beyond thinking of them predominantly in relation to oppression, including freedom from oppression (see also Quashie 2012). Feminist, queer and critical race scholars,

writers and artists have been at the forefront of tussling with these issues. The work of philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2011) has been a bold provocation to my thinking in this respect. Grosz's interventions are an example of how feminist new materialism can complicate discussions of the relations between bodies and social structures, as well as destabilising human-centred frames of liberation, agency and sequentiality as cause and effect.

Free acts

In conversation with the work of Henri Bergson, Grosz (2011: 59-60) has a novel argument for understanding liberation as 'free acts' that are not reliant on causal temporal explanations (or notions of choice), that are caught up in what already exists or has existed. Free acts, as Grosz understands them, transform us as we become with them. There is always some spark of indeterminacy and surprise. And because indeterminacy is the kith and kin of freedom, when it comes to free acts we cannot predict causality. And neither can we know what they mean in the present.

Crucially, Grosz goes on to draw a relation between degrees of sensual consciousness—her examples are the evolution of vegetal and animal life—and degrees/ranges of freedom and indetermination. Freed from the weight of humanist notions of agency, what Bennett calls 'fantasies of human mastery' (2010:122), consciousness is activity more than intentionality; 'it is a mode of simplifying or skeletalizing matter so that it affords us materials on and with which to act' (Grosz, 2011: 69). So whether it is plants, animals, insects or humans, our respective worlds hold possibilities for becoming/acting otherwise as we encounter 'materials on and

with which to act'. With Grosz, there is also an important temporal beat to free acts: 'The act once performed, once actualised, is different from the indeterminacy of its performance' (p.67).

Giving attention to the indeterminacy of actions as they emerge has its own challenges in working up and staging empirical performance narratives that I will come back to in a moment. For now, I'd like to explain how the matter and politics of time are configured in researching diasporic debility and dying and how they relate to the ideas offered by Grosz on freedom and indeterminacy.

Unbecoming bodies

Temporality in researching diasporic dying comes up at both the macro and micro scales of analysis. As economically unproductive, dependent and unruly bodies, debilitated and dying migrants are anomalies within the 'chrononormativity' of late capitalist economies. Chrononormativity as queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman (2011:3) thinks of it, is 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity'. Although economically inactive, the creolisations between organic impairments, culture and fugitive social distress that characterise some diasporic deaths are far from unproductive and can materialise the temporal otherness that I see as being a vital part of brown mattering. What I mean by temporal otherness is how bodies can live time outside of acquiescence to chrononormative time scales, particularly linear time.

With advanced disease for instance, treatment regimes and disease related impairments—changes of sight, hearing, voice, speech, taste, touch, memory, personality, skin colour and comportment—can tinker with life-long habits and somatic cultural emblems. Cultural hybridities unravel (Gunaratnam, 2014) and second languages can be lost with brain damage (conditions such as stroke, head trauma, brain metastases and dementia). The normative development pathways of growth and increasing subjectification, as well as the cultural assimilation demanded of migrants and exiles, can turn back on themselves.

The chronopolitical in such circumstances has other facets in the way that historically brutal events, as well as low-grade mundane violations, can seem to flash up into the present, triggered by certain objects and environments. What I have in mind are hallucinations, the reactivation of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and delusional ruminations and speech acts. Studies and reportage of survivors of the Holocaust who are ageing and dying are dominant narratives of the long-lasting effects of regimes of racialised violence (see Paratz and Katz 2011), as well as the intergenerational transmission of stress and trauma (see Bowers and Yehuda 2016). Synchronicity with one's present and the timing of expressed distress in these different conditions are 'off', as Muñoz might have put it (2009: 182). Yet, could these forms of temporal otherness, tell us something about realities unaffirmed by enlightenment methods and epistemologies?

The decolonialising imagination and the pursuit of postcolonial justice is often associated with this politics of knowing differently. At stake, as Savransky (2017)

believes, is the recognition of 'alter-ontologies' (Papadopoulus, 2010) as 'suppressed, silenced and marginalised – realities' (Savransky, 2017:13). With diasporic disease however, marginalised realities, such as Nirmala's, where subjective experience is frayed out across different times and spaces, can bleed into more universal disease trajectories and symptoms. To privilege alter-ontologies as part of a decolonising imperative while politically important can shortcut the problem of how to remain open to the universal and the situated singular as a continuum rather than a duality, as suggested in the fleshy praxes highlighted by McKettrick and Weheliye (2017).

I will look at this interpretive predicament in more detail using the example of the fluidity of presence and absence, problematising my empirical interference as a tendency to politicise symptoms. The risk with colonising matter through the social like this is violating both the indeterminacy and undecidability of diasporic disability and illness. The undecidable is distinguished from the indeterminate in being more than a limitless play of meanings (Derrida 1979). As I understand and use the term here, the undecidable is a temporal and ethical relation. It is an opening of meaning to the future that calls attention to the precarious and creative conditions in which interpretation takes place. The relevance of the term as an ethical provocation is the extent to which my methodology allows the alterity that is performed throughout the research process not to be pre-determined. As such, undecidability is animated as 'a responsibility to otherness in the form of maintaining the openness of the future' (Barnett 2004: 522).

Let's go back to Harshini's story once more with these provocations in mind and think of her mother's vanishing from the here and now through the sensational switch points of diasporic dementia and the undecidable otherness this can produce.

What time do you call this?

The disappearing that Harshini notices is fairly common at the end of life. In the late 1950s and early 60s, when Cicely Saunders (regarded as the founder of the contemporary hospice movement) was developing her total pain approach to end of life care, she witnessed crosscurrents of consciousness and time at the deathbed of Eastern European Jewish refugees at St Joseph's hospice, East London (see Gunaratnam 2014). For these individuals, traumatic experience seemed to be galvanised and rendered more proximate in end of life hallucinations: a symptom of conditions of 'terminal anguish', a combination of delirium, anxiety, and debilitation; and 'terminal restlessness', characterised by physical agitation (Twycross and Lichter 1998).

In her ethnography of an English hospice, the anthropologist Julia Lawton (2000) observed other modes of un/consciousness. Among individuals whose bodily surfaces had been corroded by disease, Lawton describes how 'many appeared to experience a loss of self once their bodies became severely and irreversibly unbounded, in spite of the fact that they often retained their sentience and capacity for mobility' (p.130). Selfhood was seeping out through the body in a psychic 'switching off' that for Lawton has parallels with the psychoanalytic informed observations made by Dinora Pines of survivors of the Holocaust (Pines 1993).

Lawton's multisensory narrative, infused with the sights, smells and sounds of decaying, unravelling bodies, chronicles the death of Dolly, whose cancerous tumour had blocked her colon causing faecal vomiting. At this point in her care, Dolly stopped talking and would close her eyes when nurses tended to her, 'it's as if she's shut the outside world out and herself off in the process', one nurse told Lawton (p.131).

In my ethnographic research (Gunaratnam 2013), I have offered a thick case-story of 'Violet', a Jamaican-born retired health care assistant with a huge foul-smelling fungating breast cancer tumour (a cancer that breaks through the skin or surfaces of an organ). Violet had also had a stroke and her biography included stories of domestic and racist violence. Her stance at times of racist abuse during the early 1960s, when she had migrated to the UK, was dissimulation and disengagement, summed up in the phrase she often used of 'paying no mind' to what was happening. Towards the last months of her life, Violet would increasingly disappear from the present, staring into the middle distance and becoming less communicative, prompting her nurses to consider whether she had vascular dementia as a result of her strokes. Such was the extent of Violet's dissociation from her body that she died from a catastrophic haemorrhage from a large undiagnosed pelvic mass, the symptoms of which she seemed unable to convey to her carers.

In situations like Violet's, researchers wanting to hold accountable, or at least not overlook the workings of structural power, face challenges in how we might read and extract (and/or, if that is a goal, channel the reading and extraction of)

chronology and the operation of social power inequalities within more chaotic and immanent subjective and organic processes such as those found by Lawton. As a result of our methodological and interpretive choices, the emergent plotline of the stories we tell can enact objects, space-time and place in ways that enunciate a political grammar of what Grosz (2011: 59) calls ‘deprivatory power’, or socially produced power inequalities. The risk is that multitudinous molecular bodily differences—that include a more universalised difference produced by disease making its way into the world of appearance—can be mistaken for structural or molar inscribed otherness. And when we overwrite race into racialised bodies, lives and death we risk complicity with racial thinking: of locking people into dubious categories and timelines, smothering the undecided (see Lewis, 2018; Yapp 2014).

Go back to your first thoughts, feelings and interpretations when watching Fields.

What if anything has changed about these at this point of reading? What are you not sure of now? What new questions have come up for you?

Magnetic Resonance

I have one last reiteration of Harshini’s story to think through, with the preceding discussion in mind. This example of empirical performance illuminates more explicitly the researcher as a mediator/fly. ‘Magnetic Resonance’ was the name of the empirical performance that I built up from Harshini’s narrative in Fields. It was performed at the Medicine Unboxed conference in Cheltenham in November 2014 (an initiative developed by the oncologist Sam Guglani to better understand and invigorate medicine through the arts and humanities).

Watch the performance of *Magnetic Resonance* before reading on.

Insert Magnetic Resonance file <https://vimeo.com/114193489>

Video production by Joint Effort Studios

Magnetic Resonance was a live four-and-a-half minute soliloquy by the actor Sasha Frost. The performance stages a journey from diagnosis to death, where different objects, machines, times and territories are put into play. The latter includes the ambiguity in the continuities between time and place. I mention this point about what can seem to be an extension of past experience in conditions such as end-of-life deliria and hallucinations because when it is impossible to know how the past becomes actualised in the present, we are variably pushed and tugged towards speculation. My hope was to put into appearance and into question an immanence of the creative deterritorialisations of diasporic demented dying. ‘My territories are out of grasp’ Deleuze and Guattari assert in *A Thousand Plateaus*, ‘not because they are imaginary, but the opposite: because I am in the process of drawing them...’ (1987: 199).

Magnetic Resonance is a composite. I interwove extracts from Harshini’s interview about the mala beads with narratives that other dying migrants had told me about their experiences of MRI scans—a diagnostic technology that was often felt to rearrange time and space. The performance has a narrative structure, moving quickly between different scenes and perspectives of illness, from the care professional’s to those of ‘Mrs Das’. The piece begins with a firm anchoring in

calendar time, 'August the 28th, 2.08 pm', followed by medical terms that mark the passing of time in the transformation from person to patient 'and she's learning another language, 'metastases', 'ascites', 'palliative care''.

Why choose to stage the story in relation to MRI technology? In medical diagnosis various forms of technology are routinely used to investigate and map the body beyond what can be seen, heard and felt. And yet, even with the most intimate of imaging and auscultation machinery, there can still be mystery; an excess of life that even as we try to chart and interfere with it, excludes us in its undecidability. There was a parallel inference here between the methodological apparatus of biomedicine and my methods assemblage of ethnography, qualitative interviews and creative empiricism. We may listen and look more closely, from different angles, with different tools and devices, but do we hear, see and feel in better ways? How do we know? Specifically, with the reanimation and bricolage of empirical materials in performance comes the problem of fidelity to the contingencies of undecidability; of what is/has been reordered, withdrawn or is in excess of the flows between social life and biology.

At a screen we peer into her in cross-sections (gestures with hand –slicing action - to show vertical and horizontal cuts).

Whichever way we look, we cannot foretell the dark magic that place and neurology have made of her, how these two lovers will unzip and play with what has been mixed-up and melded.

Buzzing and shimmering in various places in Magnetic Resonance are my own biographical fragments, drawn from my life world as a daughter, and subsequently carer for my parents. My father and mother had migrated from Sri Lanka to London in the late 1960s. For them, belonging remained ambivalent, if not tenuous. In the last days of my mother's life, her intravenous morphine—for managing the pain of advanced pancreatic cancer—caused mild delirium and hallucinations that included gestures, like Nirmala's, to the manifest presence of a (absent) devotional object. Her last words were full of ambiguity, spoken through the migration metaphors of 'tickets' and 'passports'².

Delusional talk or dreams of preparing for a journey have been observed among dying people as a part of 'Nearing Death Awareness' (Callanan and Kelley 1992). The condition identified by hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley denotes how dying people show an awareness of their impending death. '...those in the midst of Nearing Death Awareness may lack words to describe the experience of dying, making their messages difficult to understand because they express them in symbolic language' (p.25), Callanan and Kelley explain. Drawing on observations of two-hundred dying people, Callanan and Kelley suggest:

Familiar expressions, gestures, or even objects are often used as potent metaphors. By analyzing these attempts at communication in the context of someone's life, we can better understand what the person is trying to tell us. (p.25-6)

The encoding of body-world relations in Spillers's 'hieroglyphics of the flesh' (1987/2003), has some resonances with Callanan and Kelley's findings and with how neurologist Oliver Sacks (2012) has made sense of the subjective migrations he observed in his patients' deliria. Describing the nonstop talk of Gerald P, who was dying from kidney failure—that causes toxic levels of urea in the blood—Sacks gleaned from Gerald's notes that he had spent most of his life supervising tea plantations in 'Ceylon', 'but I could have gathered it from what he said in his delirium' Sacks writes. 'I began to see how fact and fantasy were admixed in the hieroglyphic form' (p.181).

Her last words to her daughter, come out of the freewheeling of a morphine haze.

The woman is as restless as she was those five decades before.

'Get the tickets and the passports.'

Because social violation and suffering can be dispersed and normalised, to speculate with end of life stories, a researcher must piece together an empirical account from the real, the encoded, and imagined hinterlands. She must 'make believe'. I have taken this rendering of empirical mediation from Mariam Motamedi Fraser's (2012) reflections on sociology as an informed provocation to, rather than a reflection, of experience. The capacity for stories to enact speculative embodied knowledge and felt thought is not a capacity wholly reliant on rationality and science, although speculation, as Parisi (2012) contends, must be empirically engaged.

A danger with my speculations is in instituting a politics of injustice and resistance to injustice when it is not there. That is to say, the virtual agency that can be evoked through empirical storying like mine might not be an actual quality mobilised by, or in opposition to, deprivatory structures. For this reason, I have found it more productive to think that my empirical performances are caught up in known and unknowable realities, through which the effects of deprivatory power can be conducted and imagined when the mediating/measuring experimental devices of stories give them a form of appearance (see also Barad 2007:175).

One last fly

So we are coming close to an ending. Where have we got to? Take a few moments to think back over your participation in this article, your observations, sensations and interpretations of the stories you have read and watched. What will you go away with?

Looking back over what I have written I can see how I have been trying to search out affinities between feminisms of colour, black studies and feminist new materialism. A sticking point has been how to think about the various types of imbrication of presence-absence for racially marked migrants and exiles at times when bodies and subjectivity are being radically reordered by biochemical changes. And yet the retreat or falling away of subjectivity from the now and from intersubjectivity are only strange if we think of subjectivity and sense-making as being constant and lived in the same way across different bodies and selves. Our capacity for disappearance

and flight, as Heidegger (1927/2011) believed, is a profound alterity that underlies the instability and temporal incoherence of selves.

At times, we are strangers anywhere, everywhere.

And yet, the vanishings that can come with diasporic dying are shadowed by the geopolitical: nearly 500 years of colonialism and its aftermath of multitudes of racism, xenophobia, disappearances, maiming and human rights abuses. The migrantised subjects in my research have made livable lives in relation to these contexts. And with certain disease trajectories this being *in relation* can be switched around and mixed up, becoming manifestly absent or exceeded in Weheliye's 'praxis incarnate' (McKittick and Weheliye 2017). Although I hope that the empirical performances I have staged do not trade in an either/or logic and through their undecidability invite speculation, stories risk fixing causation. In doing so, they can obscure how the symptoms of disease might not be wholly defined or even inflected by deprivatory power.

So while my empirical performances may unfurl with undecidability—including in how they affect different audiences—they come from successive retrospective (mine) and real-time reworkings (by the actors) in which events at different points have been connected through storying. With each reworking is the danger of flattening out the novel ambiguities of becoming. 'Living bodies can act, not simply or mainly through deliberation or conscious decision', Grosz (2011) has asserted, 'but through indetermination, through the capacity they bring to the material world,

to objects, to make them useful for life in ways that cannot be specified in advance.’ (p.69). Freedom, in other words, is a bodily inventiveness: how life can work itself free from ‘the immediacy and givenness of objects, but also from the givenness of the past’ (p.72). It is for these reasons that Grosz turns to the vitality of matter and actions, eschewing ‘the philosophical tradition in which questions of freedom and autonomy are irremediably tied to the functioning of a deprivatory power of the (oppressive or dominant) other...’ (p.59).

What then of those like Nirmala? When Nirmala fingers the ghostly mala beads or when she ‘returns’ to her Indian village as a demented flaneur, can we discount the inventive freedom of these acts because they seem to hold traces of ‘the givenness of the past’? What does a discouragement of thinking of ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’ at the same time and in the unfolding of actions open up and close down? Is it possible to hold matters of social in/justice, cultural difference and biology together; to allow injustice to traffic with biology in ways that might carry but can also be larger than the political in the vein that Wehilye’s diffractive reading of the Spillers-Wynters’s ‘Black life as praxis’ seems to suggest?

A methodology tussling with these questions does not solve the problem of how to trace the political circumstances and labour through which migrant bodies have lived and died, especially because as I have argued, bodily life is not reducible to politics. Thinking of artistic and performance methodologies as configured artefacts, characterised by flows of fixity and fluidity offers other hermeneutic possibilities. It is through points of fixing as ‘an effect of reiterative enactments of a particular

subject/object configuration' (Suchman 2012: 56), that performance methods can slow down, simulate and elaborate on networks of subjects and objects. Indeed, for black studies scholars Christina Sharpe (2016) and Tina Campt (2017), political legibility demands practices of reiteration. To show what has not been seen or felt before, images and texts must be redacted, annotated, re-told, relocated and re-enacted. The hard labour of repetition is a part of Sharpe's 'wake work': the explicit folding of imagination—of Motamedi Fraser's (2010) 'make believe'—into seeing, hearing and feeling as 'a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see' (p.117).

Using empirical performance films like *Fields* and *Magnetic Resonance* in talks and in teaching produces a distributed interference, as performances entwine and travel with different audiences (see also Hickey-Moody 2015). In this journeying, stories, as well as the researcher's understanding, can be 'pulled out of shape' (Lather 2016: 126). It is an empirical becoming that Rosi Braidotti thinks of as 'an outward facing intimate scholarship...one connected up and out, an affirmative becoming-intimate with the world, with otherness and diversity' (2018: 179).

Time and again, I find myself and my methods being unexpectedly opened out, such as the time in a training session with palliative care professionals when a clinical psychologist commented that the empirical performance films felt like love letters to my research participants. 'Like the scientist enfolded within the apparatus,' Suchman writes, "we'...are internal to the technologies that engage us and with which we engage.' (2012:57). So the performance of research acts back on the researcher and

empirical materials, producing unexpected insights and new 'candidates for truth', according to the knowledge systems and modes of evidence that circulate in different forums (Bell and Paolantonio 2017: 574).

And this thought brings me to one last fly. This one is from Sarah Howe's (2015) poem '(n) That from a long way off look like flies', a riff on the Chinoiserie of Borges's Celestial Emporium. The poem is about finding a fly squished between the pages of a book, being carried to other worlds and being troubled by reflections of our-selves: "More a midge really, flower-pressed: pent/in this hinged spread of my undergrad/Shakespeare. Down the page, a grey smudge/tinged with a rusty penumbra, like blood -/mine or its? Two sheer wings, stilled mid-word, trace out a glyph in a strange alphabet./At empathy's darkening pane we see/our own reflected face...' (p.51).

Notes

1. The British Academy project was titled 'Case Stories: Social Pain and Transnational Dying' (2013-14).
2. Delusions can produce an arrhythmia of language, akin to the splintering of demented speech, qualities that are beautifully evoked in Alice Oswald's (2016) poem *Flies*. Oswald's winter flies drop from the curtains to 'fall awake mid-sentence/and lie stunned on the window-sill shaking with speech':

they lift their faces to the past and walk about a bit
trying out their broken thought-machines (p.4)

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