

A Constellation of Refusals:
Blackness in Contemporary African Video Art

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Declaration

I, Lorraine Porcia Malatjie, hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Badimo ba ga Malatjie le ba ga Nghamuni, ke leboga mahlatsi le tšhirelletšo ya lena.

Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection between blackness and African video art. This is achieved through a focus on five case studies produced by African artists in the period between 2010 and 2016. The videos, *is i am sky* (Dineo Seshee Bopape, 2013), *spin* and *Polyhedra* (Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, 2014 and 2018 respectively), *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* (Kiluanji Kia Henda, 2014) and *Phyllis* (Zina Saro-Wiwa, 2010), indicate a concern with the shift in black ontology in the contemporary African imagination. The thesis contemplates the videos through their temporal, visual, sonic and videographic sensibilities and their interventionist meditation on continuous reconfigurations of anti-black existences. The thesis uses the term African video art to describe video artworks made by black African artists with direct links to South Africa, Botswana, Angola and Nigeria. It draws from ongoing black diasporic scholarship about the contemporary condition of blackness – including its formations and resistance against anti-blackness – to indicate how African artists use video to represent and grapple with daily acts of black ontological refusals. In addition to engaging with the work of key black diasporic thinkers, close readings of the videos carry out a corrective appositional reorientation of a discourse of blackness through the cultural politics of the continent. The thesis employs the notion of continental blackness to signal to African experiences of blackness – as opposed to diasporic relationality to the continent – and concludes that, while the selected artists are not immediately recognisable as investigating blackness through obvious and ubiquitous means, they nonetheless contribute to imaginative ways of articulating black people’s lived experiences through innovative ideas of blackness and technology, fugitivity, spectrality, and the social position of witchcraft. In order to conduct the appositional work of rethinking discourses of blackness via the continent, the thesis uses the five videos to inject four potential figures in narratives of continuous refusals: the machine, the fugitive, the spectre and the sorcerer, with the latter

employing black feminism to help articulate how gender can communicate hidden forms of black socialisations that are otherwise not visible to us.

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Introduction

The thesis explores the relationship between blackness, Africa and moving image, and how it is thought through contemporary African video art practices. Located within the disciplines of African Black studies, Visual Cultures, Sound Studies, Cultural Studies, this line of thinking drives the thesis and begins from the position that blackness as an ontological project is often linked to African-American expressions and experiences. This is despite the belief in African practices that are always already rooted in ontology, notions of being, and notions of being with one another. The thesis also assumes that scholarly works of moving image that extend to the African continent – sometimes referred to in the thesis simply as ‘the continent’ – find a *dénouement* in filmic practices (including shorts films, feature films and alternative films), and seldom delve into the enabling possibilities of artistic video art practices. This is evident in the limited theorisation and historicisation of video art from the continent. As such, by looking at videographic components of the data and technology-based medium of video art as employed by contemporary African art practitioners, the thesis unpacks the many ways in which blackness in Africa has been rethought to fit with its constantly shifting criteria.

The thesis asks: what is the relationship between blackness, Africa and moving image, and how is it portrayed in contemporary, post-independence African video art practices? Embedded in this key question are further questions about how we understand the developing discourse of video art on the continent, how video sits in relation to the wider history of image-making in Africa and how this fits within debates around blackness on the continent and the diaspora. The thesis also helps us think how we get a continental lens of these debates through the selected video artworks. By centralising blackness through the lens of the African

continent, the thesis aims to dislodge any belief that blackness as an object of study is a largely African-American phenomenon by highlight the ways in which artists on the continent are contributing to the discussion of race that is specific to the continent.

There are challenges with speaking about blackness as a diasporic condition, such as adopting African-American theories of blackness – which are often predicated on the encounter with slavery – to speak about blackness in Africa – whose history is riddled with the legacy of colonialism. The thesis concentrates on the issues of ‘borrowing’ from, and being in conversation with, African-American theory, while staying true to the specific experiences and histories of the continent. As shall be evident in the pages that follow, there is an attempt to continually return to African scholarship in relation to these African-American accounts of blackness. Mbembe, whose Afro-pessimistic account of blackness is diligently provided from an African perspective, sits alongside the abundance of African-American theorists such as Fred Moten, Robin Kelley, Calvin Warren, Jared Sexton, Frank B. Wilderson III and Christina Sharpe, among others. It should be mentioned, that other accounts of blackness exist in the black diaspora, such as in the Caribbean and in the United Kingdom. While some of these texts are consulted, especially the work of Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter, the thesis argues that a closer relationship exists between Africa and the U.S. where the U.S. has always been seen as an aspirational space and African-Americanness a strived for ontology for black Africans.

A key example of the difference in approaches to blackness comes in the following statement from Bryan Wagner, who asserts that “[b]lackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a particular stage in their history... Blackness is an adjunct

to racial slavery”.¹ In Wagner we see a specific alignment of blackness with the history of racial slavery, which, the thesis argues, is often considered through the lens of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The “racial slavery” discussed by Wagner is one that affects African-Americans, and, in this equation, Africa is merely a source or a natal point for these debates. The blackness that succeeds the initial encounter with the forced removal of black people from Africa is always already diasporic, of those that were in Africa, but no longer are. This does not open up a space for a contemplation of a blackness experienced by those that remained behind. By Wagner’s account, blackness might be located specifically in an African-American context if we are to ignore the many other forms of slavery that occurred across the world, including in Africa. Orlando Patterson highlights these accounts of slavery across the world, and VL Allen highlights them in the context of South Africa.² Orlando Patterson after all argues the universality of slavery, from Africans enslaving other Africans, the Arab slave trade of Africans, the slave trade between Europeans, among other forms.³ Additionally, in the case of an African-American context, due to the fact that African-American slaves were in fact taken from Africa, slavery has a close affinity to Africa. The statement by Wagner, will arguable always be read as: Blackness is an adjunct to *African-American* racial slavery. With this in mind, if we are to adopt the theory posited by Wagner, that blackness in the States is born from an encounter with slavery, are we then to imagine that blackness in Africa is born from an encounter with colonialism? It is worthwhile to consider Wagner’s statement outside its geographical confines, and to consider what is fully at stake in what he is saying, that blackness is made into being through violent encounters, whether they be transatlantic slavery, the enslavement of black people in Africa (or elsewhere in the world) or through encounters such as colonialism.

¹ Cited in Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 222.

² Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*; Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*.

³ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

With this in mind, the thesis contemplates a continental blackness that sits and is experienced alongside diasporic accounts of blackness. This is done through a concentration on African political ruptures that are meant to create blackness (if we follow Wagner), but one that is constantly in flux, determined always, often to its detriment, by its social and political condition. We ought to consider, however, that our thinking of blackness could be separated between an African ontology prior to colonialism, and one after the encounter with colonialism, which, perhaps, is the ‘birth’ or the origin of blackness. Following that line of thought leads us to the assertion that “[b]lackness is not adjunct to racial slavery [or any other political condition], but is *violently appropriated during* slavery. If blackness is ontological, its ontological constitution precedes its ontological captivity”.⁴ In this account of thinking blackness, it is that which does not exist prior to its encounter with violence, but rather black people are made black, through and by whiteness, because of and as a result of the violence enacted on them. In Kathryn Yusoff’s thesis of the relationship between blackness and geology, blackness is made black through its encounter with the stratifying relationship it is forced into with geology. Yusoff states that

[t]he racial categorization of Blackness shares natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus for colonialisms in the first instance. This means that the idea of Blackness and the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples get caught and defined in the ontological wake of geology.⁵

From this, we are alerted to the many forms of violent encounters that form the category of blackness for black people, and are alerted to the fact that each of them requires adequate space for extrapolation. We are also alerted to the fact that the violence against blackness and

⁴ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 223 Emphasis added.

⁵ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 2.

black people is never-ending, is vast, and does not begin and end with the narratives that have been popularised and made ubiquitous.

There is a preoccupation within African-American theories of blackness to locate blackness in relation to the political condition brought about by slavery. Calvin Warren, for instance, argues that for the Afro-pessimists, blackness is the condition brought about by a certain political condition, that of slavery.⁶ In the thesis, the origins of blackness are not argued for. There is little concern with whether, if we are to follow the Afro-pessimistic classification, blackness originated in a political rupture, which, in the context of Africa, would be through the contact with colonialism. The aim is to look at *how* blackness was affected by revolutionary moments of daily refusal – and how it is understood and represented in post-independence African art. What this means is that blackness always already preceded slavery, and is not created by it. And what the Afro-pessimists call the origin of blackness (during slavery) is in fact the ‘origin’ of the perversion of and violence on blackness, that is, the birth of anti-blackness. In the same way that blackness is seen in relation to slavery in an African-American context, the research looks at the effects of colonialism in relation to blackness. The thesis does not look at the birth of blackness and black ontology in relation to colonialism, for blackness (or a different form of it) is argued to exist prior to colonialism, but rather looks at the shift in the condition of blackness from the colonial moment, to its supposed post-colonial moment.

The discussion about continental blackness is mobilised through contemporary African video art. The thesis meditates on what is it that is enabling about moving image – and video art in particular – in issues of blackness on the continent. Could it be the nature of the filmic aspect

⁶ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit.”

of moving image, and that through moving image, chronological (and by extension colonial) comprehensions of standardised time – normally divided into the beginning, the middle, and the end – can be eradicated and used as a form of resistance? Could it be the unique ways of representing reality (or its alternatives) that video aesthetics and videographic lexicons enable as they offer possibilities of reconfigurations and reimaginings of the ordinary? Could it be in the inherent nature of the technological that accompanies moving image, and that its relationship to blackness and black practitioners open up a dialogue about notions of progress and anti-black worldliness? Could it also be in the merge between the visual and the sonic (or lack thereof) of video art, which enables an imagination of blackness not only through the visual, but also through the sonic, thus providing multiple modes of conceiving of blackness? Video art is a medium that effectively challenges our conception of time and space. It can be narrative based, thus operating close to reality, or as a juxtaposition of abstract, even fictional, imagery. It is precisely for these reasons that video art can be seen to provide alternative spaces and realities for blackness, something that is key to the thesis. Dan Graham elaborates on this point, stating that

[v]ideo is a present-time medium. Its image can be simultaneous with its perception by/of its audience (it can be an image of its audience perceiving). The space/time it presents is continuous, unbroken and congruent to that of the real time which is the shared time of its perceivers... This is unlike film which is, necessarily, an edited representation of the past of another reality... for separate contemplation by unconnected individuals. Film is discontinuous, its language constructed, in fact, from syntactical and temporal disjunctions (for example, montage). Film is a reflection of a reality external to the spectator's body; the spectator's body is out of frame. In a live video situation, the spectator may be included in frame at one moment or be out of frame at another moment. Film constructs a 'reality' separate and incongruent to the viewing situation; video feeds back indigenous data in the immediate, present-time environment or connects parallel time-space continua. Film is contemplative and 'distanced'; it detaches a viewer from present reality and makes him [sic] a spectator.⁷

⁷ Graham, *Video, Architecture, Television: Writings on Video and Video Works, 1970 - 1978*, 62.

Blackness – and by extension, Africa – is assumed to be “pretetechnological”, that is, before the technological.⁸ Its encounter with technology is perceived to be mediated by the west through colonialism. There is thus an assumed adversarial relationship between blackness and technology, which Louis Chude-Sokei contests.⁹ It is thus compelling to explore blackness through technology, which is potentiated by the medium of video. Furthermore, video opens up interesting conversations about race, including time, motion, and sound.

Colonialism is often understood as a forceful and violent occupation of space. In addition to space or land-based colonisation, the colonisation of time was instrumental in the broader colonial project. What does it actually mean to speak about space, time and technology as concepts that are universal? On closer examination, people’s sense of space and particularly time, differ. Newell S. Booth Jr. writes, “[i]n western culture time seems to be thought of generally as a line extending equally into past and future, marked off in units of hours, days, years, and centuries. There appears to be some uncertainty as to whether time ‘moves’ or whether we move through time; at any rate, there is agreement that in some sense we are ‘headed toward the future’. Men plan, work and struggle in order that the future may be better than the past.”¹⁰ The perception of time in African cosmology is characterised by different rules. African philosopher John Mbiti argues that time in some African languages (Kikamba, for example) is calculated by the past, and present, and maybe the immediate future.¹¹ The distant future is of little importance. While Mbiti’s conception of African time has been problematised by philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu because it denies Africans futurity – it instead sees them existing solely in the past and the present – these

⁸ Louis Chude-Sokei, “Introduction: Blackness as Method,” 31.

⁹ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*.

¹⁰ Booth, “Time and Change in Africana Traditional Thought,” 81.

¹¹ Cited in Booth, 81.

conversations prove that time is not a universal concept, but is experienced and understood differently by different people.¹² Giodarni Nanni state that “time ... is embodied in the various rituals, routines, calendars, discourses and devices which provide a sense of regularity and rhythm and which orientate human collectives towards an accepted authority, whether they be in the celestial motions of the stars or the mechanical ticking of clocks”.¹³ He further states that “the experience of time is a human universal – one that all societies share in common – but the ways in which that experience is measured, perceived and conceptualised can vary widely from culture to culture”.¹⁴ Nanni demonstrates that a certain version of time, one that stems from Europe, had been naturalised and engrained in the consciousness of people around the world – the result is that it has become the true and sole version of time.¹⁵ The issue of “temporal imperialism”, that is, strategically finding ways of controlling a whole population by dictating how they should experience time, was used mainly as a way of dictating how the colonised should participate in forced labour.¹⁶ As such, the temporal possibilities afforded by video – the ability not to adhere to chronology, to potentially swap middle, end and beginning – is an enabling ability for blackness. Seeing that time was used to construct a singular, anti-black and violent existence for blackness, it makes sense to employ a medium that undermines that violence in innovative ways. In addition to examining how time was used as a colonial tool, Nanni signals to the ways in which the colonised would negotiate their way around this imposed standardised time, as a kind of refusal of their temporal impositions.¹⁷ By concentrating on the temporal aspect of the video medium, the thesis seeks to highlight modes of refusals that are carried out with, against and on the temporal line. This refusals is against the standardisation and universalisation of colonial time in the colonies. If we can argue that time in Africa is different from time in Europe or other

¹² Wiredu, “Philosophy and Authenticity.”

¹³ Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire*, 7.

¹⁴ Nanni, 7.

¹⁵ Nanni, 1.

¹⁶ Nanni, 2.

¹⁷ Nanni, 7.

parts of the world, how then do we even begin to speak about video as a technological, time- and space-based medium? It is evident, then, that to think of video art from Africa – and how it is consumed in Africa by Africans – we need to extrapolate beyond conventional understandings of time. The time-based aspect of video art affords the opportunity to rethink and complicate our conception of the normal. An understanding of blackness through time is therefore allowed adequate space for investigation through video.

What video art also potentiates is a conversation about sound. This is important for the purpose of the thesis, which looks at alternative and innovative ways of articulating contemporary experiences of blackness. There has been growing scholarship on race and sound studies that has produced new ways of understanding the ontology of blackness.¹⁸ In “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies”, Marie Thompson notices the recent interest of reading race through the sonic. She argues that “the (re)turn to ontology in sound studies is predicated on an ‘origin myth’ that disavows ‘old’ questions of culture, signification, discourse and identity, and promotes ‘new’ questions of materiality, affectivity reality and being”.¹⁹ A generative example of the appositional nature of African and African-American scholarship and knowledge production can be found in the growing work of blackness and/through sound studies. It is here that the thesis turns to Alexander Weheliye, Louis Chude-Sokei, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, Fred Moten, Tina Campt and Marie Thompson and their investigation of race through sound.²⁰ The thesis looks at how the temporal and periodising notions of pre-colonialism, colonialism, and postcolonialism are oftentimes not adequate when considering the political and social history of the continent. While these terms

¹⁸ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*; Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*; Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*; Campt, *Listening to Images*; Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*.

¹⁹ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” 266.

²⁰ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*; Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*; Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies”; Campt, *Listening to Images*.

are adopted throughout the thesis and there is an unavoidable commitment to their chronological makeup, this is often done as a counter-strategy as a way of indicating their limits, but also acknowledging how entrenched they are to the history of the continent: Africa is seldom conceived of independent of its colonial history. With this in mind, while the videos are produced in a contemporary period after 2010, they nonetheless always refer to past moments that have significance to the construction and sustaining of anti-blackness. The thesis therefore visits apartheid South Africa through Bopape, the birth of the mining industry in 1880s Southern Africa through Sunstrum, the Angolan Revolution of 1975 in Kia Henda and the birth of the Nollywood film industry in 1990s Nigeria through Saro-Wiwa. The incessant nature of the artists to look back and forth in time highlights the necessity to rethink the ways in which some histories are written and from which perspective they are written from. By going back to certain historical moments, the artists are seen to make sense of the present and to cultivate a way of thinking about a futurity for blackness.

The thesis thinks blackness from the lens of Africa through a close encounter with five video artworks by black African artists Zina Saro-Wiwa (Nigerian-British), Dineo Seshee Bopape (South African), Kiluanji Kia Henda (Angolan) and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum (Motswana) in their works that were produced in a period between 2010 and 2016. The videos, *Phyllis* (2010) by Saro-Wiwa, *is i am sky* (2013) by Bopape, *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* (2014) by Kia Henda, and *spin* (2013) and *Polyhedra* (2016) by Sunstrum, are all exemplary of contemporary African artistic concerns of being black in contemporary Africa, decades after the attaining of independence from colonial rule. The case studies are used to divide the thesis into four chapters, “The Machine: *is i am sky* and the Technology of Blackness”, “The Fugitive: *spin*, *Polyhedra* and Escapes Towards Futurity”, “The Spectre: *Concrete Affection* and Ghosts as Black Ontological and Temporal Visions”, and lastly, “The Sorcerer: *Phyllis* –

Communing Through Sonic Black Feminist Spiritualities”. The thesis chapters are not structured chronologically, but rather follow an intuitive flow, from the 2013 *is i am sky*, to the 2013 *spin* and 2016 *Polyhedra*, to the older 2010 *Phyllis*, and finally resting back at the 2014 *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*.

Motivated by the fact that African video art practice is hardly ever theorised, the selected videos are very different in strategy and methodology, thus showing the multitude of videographic concerns on the continent. This is not to say that the thesis aims at an exemplary survey of African video art, for such an endeavour would dilute the intended strategy of deep ontological analysis through the videos. There are also far too many other artists who could have been included in such an endeavour. In addition to the diverse styles and methodologies, the selected videos are located within contemporary, post-independence moments in different geographical and temporal contexts in Africa, such as the role of womanhood in contemporary, post-independence Nigeria, the haunting capacity of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa, the colonial spectre in post-independence Angola, and the strained relationship between black people that was caused by the birth of the mining industry in Southern Africa. The videos are prompted by social and political conditions and moments in their contexts. The underlying key concerns of all the videos is a commitment to blackness, the black condition, and how it is affected by its post-independence political and social context. The significance of the difference in video medium and styles is to show a vast array of ways in which blackness is dealt with, but to also indicate that in their difference, they are still communicating a single, core, underlying issue: that blackness still operates within an anti-black world, and that black people are still always resistant to this anti-blackness and always find ways to counter an anti-black existence. Furthermore, while blackness still exists

in conditions that are designed to subjugate it, it still forms its own space and mode of operating and being that is adjacent to the anti-black world.

The thesis chapters, that are all based on case studies, are preceded by “Framework: Continental Blackness and African Video Art”, which contextualises conceptual, cultural and methodological concerns of the research. The chapter concentrates on giving a historical account of continental blackness and separates it from contemporary African-American accounts of Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism. In addition to unpacking the nature of contemporary black studies, the chapter also contextualises contemporary African video art, which has seldom been discussed, and finally discusses the methodologies employed in the thesis. The Framework chapter is followed by Chapter 1, which explores the relationship between blackness and technology through Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *is i am sky*. Titled, “The Machine: *is i am sky* and the Technology of Blackness”, Chapter 1 concentrates on the references that Bopape uses to unpack her exploration into issues of land possession and landlessness, memory and historicity, as well as the notion of nothingness as it relates to blackness. The video artwork references South African political struggle/freedom songs and the way they have historically been used as modes of resistance against an oppressive apartheid system. With that in mind, Bopape goes out into a landscape in San Francisco and begins singing the struggle song, *Hamba Kahle Mkhonto (Go well spear of the nation)* to the landscape. This act of singing to the land is read as a Bopape’s mobilising of technology – the technology of the song, and the technology of her body – in imagining what shape a world that is not violent to blackness would take. In her cross-disciplinary practice, Bopape often investigates junctures in trans-continental cosmic realms made by African diasporic communities, such as the practice of voodoo in Haitian ceremonies. In the abstract, non-narrativised *is i am sky*, Bopape refers to *The Endless Realm* (1975), a poem by African-

American poet, artist and musician Sun Ra that begins with the phrase, “I am nothing”. In it Sun Ra contemplates his lack of material possession, a being that is a proprietor to a “vast endless nothing”, whose lack “branche[s] out into realm beyond realm”.²¹ The reference to Sun Ra’s exploration of nothingness opens up a conversation between blackness and nothingness, or blackness as nothingness. Here the chapter turns to the work of Calvin Warren, David Marriot and Fred Moten to explore what Warren calls “ontological terror” that is inspired by the conception of blackness as nothing.²² What is most at stake in *is i am sky* is Bopape’s disruptive use of technology. The artist foregrounds videographic elements, including the video and the sound mixers in the core component of the video. She does not make invisible videographic strategies such as visual and sonic blending, dissolve and saturation, but instead choses to put them in the foreground of the video. Furthermore, she makes a point of presenting us with impure, corrupted and distorted sounds that would otherwise be polished in postproduction to produce an immaculate final product. These videographic and sonic corruptions, as well as the foregrounding of a technology that should otherwise be hidden, is read in relation to Louis Chude-Sokei’s ‘Black Technopoetics’, which forefronts the relationship between race and technology, and race as technology.²³

“The Machine” is followed by an investigation into the ways in which blackness refuses its imposed subjugated position in an anti-black world. This is achieved through the unpacking of Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum’s two videos, *spin* and *Polyhedra* in a chapter, titled “The Fugitive: *spin*, *Polyhedra* and Escapes Towards Futurity”. The concerns of the chapter are twofold. Firstly, through *spin*, an investigation into the relationship between blackness, anthropometry and the colonial grid system open up a conversation about the policed

²¹ Ra, *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation. The Collected Poetry and Prose*.

²² Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*; Marriot, “Judging Fanon”; Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

²³ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*.

movement of black people in the colonies. The section begins with an analysis of Anglo-American photographer and pioneer of modern-day moving image Eadweard Muybridge, whom Sunstrum references, and his use of the grid system as a means to measure the movement of animals and bodies. Sunstrum is seen to deliberately refer to Muybridge as a way of contesting his initial use of the grid system when photographing a black body. This is to say, throughout his career, Muybridge had been photographing bodies without the use of the gridded measuring device, and only began using the grid when he encountered a black body. This propels Sunstrum to question the policing of black bodies and how they move through time and space. In *spin*, she begins with a Muybridgean bird in flight, but, instead of presenting it as seamlessly flying within the imposed gridded system, she presents a glitch in the bird's movement. In the chapter, the glitch is read through the notion of blackness and fugitivity as it appears in the work of Tina Campt, Fred Moten and Daphne Brooke.²⁴ Central to the argument of blackness and fugitivity is the notion of refusal and how blackness has never accepted its imposed subjugation. Instead, blackness resists subjugatory systems through daily acts of refusals and resistance. In the chapter, we come to learn that these acts of refusal and fugitivity come in different ways. Through Campt and the glitch in *spin*, we are presented with the possibility of stasis as a form of black fugitivity.²⁵ *spin* compels us to think with Marie Thompson's assertion that blackness is that which "disrupts and resists the ontological" and is that which "is escaped and it is what escapes".²⁶

The chapter's second part concentrates on *Polyhedra* and the mining industry in Southern Africa. It looks at the use of geology in the colonisation process, and looks at the intersection between blackness and forced labour through Kathryn Yusoff's notion of "environmental

²⁴ Campt, *Listening to Images*; Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness"; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850 - 1910*.

²⁵ Campt, *Listening to Images*.

²⁶ Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 268.

racism”.²⁷ In her seminal book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff signals to the fact that our relationship with geology is never neutral, and that whiteness, through what she calls White Geology, has used geology to extract resources from the earth.²⁸ In this extraction of resources, the black body was instrumentalised in the extraction, often at the expense of its life. The relationship between extraction and the death of black people is explored in *Polyhedra* through mining accidents that have claimed a lot of black lives throughout history. Sunstrum compels us to think about the black miners who die in the mines and are rendered unrecoverable. The unrecoverability of their bodies, the chapter argues, refuses them a proper burial, which in turn refuses them the last ontological status of ancestry that is believed across many Southern African traditions. By turning to the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva and her notion of blackness as that which can traverse space and time, the work reads the volcanic eruption represented by Sunstrum as a potential way of unearthing the bodies of the dead miners.²⁹

The relationship between blackness and death is further explored in “The Spectre: *Concrete Affection* and Ghosts as Ontological and Temporal Visions”. The chapter, which analyses Kiluanji Kia Henda’s *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*, looks at the imminent moment of the Angolan revolution of 1975. Henda unpacks the role of voice and visuals in the narration of history, and makes us question who is allowed to communicate the events of the revolution. The video begins with a reference to the Polish Press Agency’s reporter, Ryszard Kapuściński and his book *Another Day of Life*, which documented the moments before the October independence from Portuguese rule. The video is presented in the city of Luanda, with Kapuściński waking up in the morning, and walking around the city, a day before he has to leave for Europe. The voice narrates what it is witnessing, and the spectator is presented

²⁷ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 5.

²⁸ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

²⁹ Ferreira da Silva, “1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value.”

with an empty city. Kapuściński communicates that the Portuguese settlers are leaving the country, and that with their departure, no one will be left behind. It is this moment of an assumed “no-one” being left behind that is the premise of the chapter. The chapter asks, why are the black Angolans who would remain behind not perceived as humans who will take over the city? It is with this in mind that the chapter introduces the notion of black spectrality, where blackness is related the status of the spectre and Luanda the status of a graveyard. Here the chapter turns to the work of Achille Mbembe and his theorising of blackness as ghostliness living life in ghost worlds.³⁰ Mbembe helps us think the condition of blackness as that which is outside the human through damaging conceptions such as spectrality. In addition to the invisibilisation of blackness through the omission of black bodies in the video’s narrative, the chapter looks at, or listens to, the overrepresentation of Kapuściński’s voice (through voice-over), as the sole voice in the narration of the video. This sole representation of the Polish reporter’s voice is seen as an amplification of whiteness and exemplary of what Marie Thompson calls “white aurality”.³¹ The amplification of a white man’s voice is listened to against the muffled sounds of black voices.

The voice and the sonic form an integral part of the final chapter, “The Sorcerer: *Phyllis* – Communing Through Sonic Black Feminist Spiritualities”. The chapter mobilises Zina Saro-Wiwa’s video *Phyllis*, to propose black women’s spiritual practices as viable modes of knowledge production and resistance. Through *Phyllis*, the chapter looks at the problem of speaking about African black womanhood and its spirituality because most writing is focused on African-American women and their diasporic links to African spiritual practices. As such, looking at *Phyllis* through African black women’s spiritual practices adds to the necessary gap that exists. Through the Nollywood film industry, and its perpetual representation of

³⁰ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola.”

³¹ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies.”

women as witches, the chapter looks at the social and political implications of the depictions of African black women's spiritual praxis in popular culture and how they add to the contemporary public imagination of black women. Phyllis – a central character in the video who is simultaneously a protagonist and antagonist – as well as the figure of the witch in Nollywood help us think through practices of representations of African black womanhood and the aesthetics and politics of refusal that are bound up with black women's spiritual praxis. *Phyllis* appropriates Nollywood in order to subvert and simultaneously question the genre. The film is an example of alt-Nollywood, a filmic form created and coined by Saro-Wiwa that uses Nollywood traits to disrupt some of its characteristics and shortcomings. Saro-Wiwa explores politics of hair, specifically wig-wearing in Nollywood, as an entry point to discuss the multitude of ideas present in the film. The wig in *Phyllis* becomes a vehicle for the central character to travel and exist in multiple realities. By adorning and taking off the different coloured wigs, she accesses other worlds and alternative realities that perhaps provides solace and an escape from her current anti-black womanhood existence. *Phyllis* interrogates the representation of women in Nollywood as hysterical and overly dramatic. This representation is married with the use of wigs by Phyllis as a recording device and a sonic technology that helps the character commune with other black women in the spiritual realm.

Through the five case studies that run across four chapters, the thesis makes a point about the nature of aesthetic practices that concentrate on articulating contemporary conceptions of blackness in Africa. The chapters and their case studies overtly signal to historical moments across different geographies in Africa and how they were instrumental in creating anti-blackness. These moments, including the use and abuse of geology, the perversion of land and land possession, the representation of blackness in cultural forms as well as the erasure of

blackness from the telling of its own history, are exemplary of structures that see blackness as outside of humanity, something to be subjugated and used, while never been seen as fully human. However, the thesis comes to the conclusion that, what is most at stake in these accounts of anti-blackness are the daily acts of refusal that black people employ across the continent to resist the anti-blackness they have been forced to endure across the centuries.

Framework: Continental Blackness and African Moving Image

Introduction

The Framework chapter sets out the conceptual, cultural and methodological frameworks of the thesis. Its main aim is to position the reader with the case studies chapters that are to follow. The main concern of the chapter, that is blackness both diasporic and continental, will be outlined. The continental accounts of blackness will be located within Négritude, Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Fanonism, while diasporic accounts of blackness will be read through Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism. The thesis argues that African-American accounts of blackness – sometimes in conversation with Caribbean accounts, and on the rare occasion with Mbembe – are purported as the key accounts of a universal lived black experience. Despite this claim and an aversion to centralising African-American scholarship, the thesis acknowledges the important and thought-provoking work made by contemporary African-American scholars such as Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton and Frank B Wilderson III, among others, in the contemporary articulation of the continued struggles of black people in an anti-black world. As such, a section will be dedicated to “African Accounts of Blackness” by looking at the ongoing definitions and debates about and between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism. The thesis will refer to some of these scholars in varying degrees in the chapters that follows.

Having set-up the theoretical frameworks that sustain the thesis, the framework chapter will then contextualise the moving image on the continent. Seeing that little has been written about the history of video art on the continent – a key focus of the thesis – the section on African moving image will begin with a look at blackness in African popular culture through

African cinema. African cinema becomes the entry point to a discussion of African video art. The chapter will conclude with a methodology section that indicates the strategies used to construct the arguments in the chapters, including notions of poetics, oppositionality, textual, visual and sonic analyses, as well as Louis Chude-Sokei's notion of "Blackness as Method".³²

Blackness and Anti-Blackness

The thesis begins from a perspective that blackness is experienced differently in different parts of the world. Blackness is not an all-inclusive term. It is context specific, and the blackness experienced by African-Americans is different to that experienced by Africans. Similarly, a blackness experienced by Nigerians differs to one experienced by South Africans. With that in mind, there have also been different definitions of what constitutes blackness, which can often be divided into those who are politically black and those who are seen as 'black black' or 'real black'. Blackness as it is discussed in the thesis is seen as the "damned" or the "wretched", to borrow from Frantz Fanon.³³ These different forms of blackness are the difference between what Lewis Gordon calls "the blacks of everywhere, the black blacks, the blackest blacks" as opposed to black that is black only in "particular contexts".³⁴ The thesis is concerned with the blackness of everywhere, and not the blackness of certain geographical and temporal specificities. It is concerned with the blackness of everywhere (and every time) and not that of somewhere (and sometimes). The thesis, does, however, locate this blackness of everywhere and/or 'everytime' within a specific geographical location (that is Africa) and a specific time (that is post 2010). However, the blackness discussed is seen as being black in any context, as opposed to a political blackness

³² Louis Chude-Sokei, "Introduction: Blackness as Method."

³³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

³⁴ Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, 53.

that might be seen as black only in certain scenarios. The thesis has chosen to “[refuse] the flattening of racial hierarchy into a rainbow colored affair”, as stated by Sexton and Copeland, by not opting for a discussion that revolves around political blackness.³⁵ This is not to suggest an opposition to political blackness, but is merely a preference towards a better productivity of the issues and works at hand.

The thesis is of the opinion that political blackness has served a particular useful function in certain contexts – a solidarity against a common white supremacist oppressive structure. The Black Consciousness Movement in 1960s and 1970s South Africa argued for the use of the term black as the coming together of black, Indian, coloured³⁶ and other people of colour to mobilise against the apartheid government.³⁷ Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko distinguished between non-white and what he referred to as ‘blacks’.³⁸ Biko offers an account of what can be described as political blackness when he asserts that, “[w]e have defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations”.³⁹ Herewith lies the ‘common goal’ against a common enemy that is oppressive to anyone who is not white. In this instance, political blackness is attributed to anyone who is not classifiable as white by the apartheid regime. Biko continues: “Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude”– this attitude is one where the politically black person is politically motivated to actively undermine and eradicate white supremacy, and is therefore not “all inclusive, i.e. the fact that we are all not white does not necessarily mean that we are

³⁵ Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” 58.

³⁶ The term Coloured, although an apartheid racial classification, is still used today. It does not have the same derogatory meaning as it does in the U.S., the Caribbean or other black diasporas.

³⁷ A further, albeit truncated, account of the Black Consciousness Movement, led by Steve Biko in South Africa, shall be given below in the section ‘Blackness in Africa: Fanon, Pan-Africanism, Négritude and the Black Consciousness Movement’.

³⁸ Biko, “The Definition of Black Consciousness,” np.

³⁹ Biko, np.

all black”.⁴⁰ Biko’s definition of (politically) black people, or “real black people – are those who can manage to hold their heads high in defiance rather than willingly surrender their souls to the white man”.⁴¹ The “real black people” that Biko speaks of are in Gordon’s terms, the black people of “particular contexts” and not the “blacks of everywhere”.⁴² Within the many different forms of blackness, a distinction and a sensitivity to the different lived experiences needs to be accounted for. Additionally, the thesis uses black people instead of ‘blacks’ as a quest towards subjectivity, and argues that the term ‘blacks’ bears an element of pre-determined and pre-conditioned objectivity.

The thesis centralises the lived experiences of black people and argues against anti-black, anti-blackness, and anti-black racism. Anti-black racism can be seen as the construction of black people as outside the human and as inferior to other races. It is “the cipher of negativity” against which whiteness and white supremacy measures itself to instil its self-imposed superiority.⁴³ The term, widely attributed to Lewis Gordon in numerous of his texts, including *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* and *Her Majesty’s Other Children*, interestingly also appears in Biko’s writings and speeches in the early 1970s.⁴⁴ In a definition that Biko gives of Black Consciousness as it pertains to black people living under the control of the apartheid regime, he articulates how “the [apartheid] system has allowed so dangerous an anti-black attitude to build up among whites” especially poor ‘whites’ who are economically at odds and in competition with the black majority.⁴⁵ The competitive nature between black people and poor white people, he believes, fostered “the greatest anti-black feeling... amongst the very poor whites”.⁴⁶ For Biko, anti-blackness (or anti-black racism) is synonymous with

⁴⁰ Biko, np.

⁴¹ Biko, np.

⁴² Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, 53.

⁴³ Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” 58.

⁴⁴ Copeland, 57.

⁴⁵ Biko, “The Definition of Black Consciousness,” np.

⁴⁶ Biko, np.

“White Racism”: “It is the one force against which all of us [who are classified *Black*] are pitted”.⁴⁷ Lewis Gordon later offers an account of anti-black existence, remarking that “[i]n the antiblack world there is but one race, and that race is black. Thus, to be racialized is to be pushed ‘down’ towards blackness, and to be deracialized is to be pushed ‘up’ towards whiteness”.⁴⁸ Anti-blackness is the result of racialisation, which, as Chude-Sokei offers, is “the processes by which racial meanings are made” as a way of distinguishing the superiority of one race over another.⁴⁹ While Gordon, along with Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton are often acknowledged as the initial introducers of the term anti-blackness in African-American black studies, anti-black theorising is recognised in earlier works. Gordon himself argues for this point, stating that Fanon “developed a profound social-existential analysis of antiblack racism, which led him to identify conditions of skewed rationality and reason in contemporary discourse on the human being”.⁵⁰

Premised from Gordon’s assertion that “black people are a denied people”, anti-blackness denies black people personhood and is thus the inability to accept the subjectivity of black people.⁵¹ This denial that blackness faces is exemplified through anti-blackness that is also inscribed on the black body that cannot escape its racial classification as black. Anti-black racism is both an oppressive condition imposed on black people, as well as the mechanism and means of achieving and inflicting that oppressive condition. Following from Gordon and Moten (who both refer to Martinican theorist Frantz Fanon), a separation is seen to exist between the lived experience of black people and what blackness is structured and promoted to be. Gordon refers to this as “the split between lived reality and structure” and Moten (also extending Fanon) refers to as the difference between “the fact of blackness and the lived

⁴⁷ Biko, np.

⁴⁸ Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, 76.

⁴⁹ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 4.

⁵⁰ Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, 2.

⁵¹ Gordon, 8.

experiences of the black”.⁵² This separation indicates what black people ‘actually’ go through on a daily basis, and what white supremacist structures intending to maintain their position argue is the lived experience of black people. This process between the separation of reality and construction is enabled and carried out through anti-black racism, and in turn maintains that anti-black racism by purporting a particular problematic and inferior view of blackness. Consequently, the construction, the structure of anti-blackness by white supremacy, influences the lived experiences of black people that is in line with the myth in a kind of cyclical self-prophesising paradox. The separation that is predicated on anti-blackness and is itself anti-black further de-individualises black people and their unique experiences by assuming a universality of being black in the world. Gordon asserts that

[t]he dehumanizing bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism marks the black, who is, in the end, ‘anonymous’ in a perverse way, which enables ‘the black’ to collapse into ‘blacks’. It is perverse because whereas ‘blacks’ is not a proper name, antiblack racism makes it function as such, as a name of familiarity that closes off the need for further knowledge.⁵³

Here anti-black racism is read as an apparatus and strategy that is used to construct and maintain a society where black people are relegated a continued racist and oppressive existence in a world that is anti-black. This world that is anti-black, or “a world of antiblack brutality”, as Calvin Warren might call it, is “a world in which black torture, dismemberment, fatality, and fracturing are routinized and ritualized”.⁵⁴ There are two potential spellings for anti-blackness; one, ‘anti-blackness’ is used by Biko, while ‘antiblackness’ is used by Gordon and others. The thesis has chosen the Bikonian option, and shall refer to it as anti-blackness. Moreover, the term positive black (and especially positive black womanhood in Chapter 4) is sometimes used in the thesis as a counter to anti-black conceptions. For Calvin

⁵² Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*; Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

⁵³ Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, 22.

⁵⁴ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 2.

Warren, anti-blackness manifests as a hatred of black people all over the world.⁵⁵ Anti-blackness is “an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to imposed nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence *as nothing incarnated*”.⁵⁶

Certain black studies might strive for a world where anti-blackness no longer exist and where black people would be treated with the same humanity as every other race. Calvin Warren, however argues that anti-blackness will never cease to exist, and that there is no hope for a deliverance from anti-blackness that is sought out by what he calls black humanists.⁵⁷ For Warren, “[t]he form of antiblackness might alter, but antiblackness itself will remain a constant – despite the power of our imagination and political yearnings”.⁵⁸ Warren believes in what Audre Lorde would call the inability of the “master’s tools” to “dismantle the master’s house”, and the fact that any attempt to eradicate anti-blackness has used anti-black strategies to achieve its desired goal.⁵⁹ He asserts that

[s]cientific reasoning, technological innovation and legality are tools black humanisms use to quantify suffering, measure progress, proffer universal narratives of humanity, and reason with antiblack institutions. All problems have solutions for black humanists, and their task is to uncover the solution the problem conceals, as this uncovering equates to an eradication of the problem.⁶⁰

What is at stake in Warren’s statement is whether or not anti-blackness can be eradicated, or whether black people should contend with the fact that things will not change, or if they do change, the change would bring about a new form of an anti-black world. The fallacy of the end of anti-blackness is for Warren reinforced by the belief that black people attaining a form

⁵⁵ Warren, 9.

⁵⁶ Warren, 9.

⁵⁷ Warren, 4.

⁵⁸ Warren, 3.

⁵⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

⁶⁰ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 4.

of humanism would mean the end of the of the world since the world rotates mainly on an axis of anti-blackness.⁶¹

Blackness as a diasporic or universal experience does not account for the multiplicity of black people's experiences across the world. Being black in the diaspora has a different condition to being black in Africa. If, to follow from Calvin Warren in "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit", the condition of blackness (or more aptly, anti-blackness) results from encounters with political and economic systems such as slavery, colonialism or both, then these different histories need to be taken into account when discussing forms of blackness and anti-blackness.⁶² Furthermore, certain kinds of black experiences – such as the African-American experience – are often purported as the umbrella or more palatable way of embarking on this ontological quest. It is with this in mind, and with the desire to differentiate blackness in Africa from forms of diasporic blackness that the thesis adopts the term *continental blackness*. Continental blackness thus speaks to the lived conditions on the African continent. This strategy is not without its own challenges. Distinguishing continental blackness from African-American or diasporic conceptions of blackness may present like a deviation or variation from a norm (where the norm is African-American experiences of being black in the world), and may inadvertently place different forms of blackness hierarchically. As history has shown, continental blackness would be received as the lesser form in this equation. As such, the thesis calls for a further distinction on all accounts, where African-American conceptions of blackness and its close affiliation with the transatlantic slave trade should be classified as such, Caribbean conceptions of blackness discussed accordingly, so that continental blackness, in a spirit of refusing a

⁶¹ Warren, 6.

⁶² Warren, "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit," 223.

hierarchy of black experiences, can be seen for what it is, a different yet equally worthy point of analysis to its diasporic counterparts.

Continental Blackness: Négritude, Pan-Africanism, the Black Consciousness

Movement and Fanon

There is a long history of theorising blackness on the continent, whether this is done by African scholars such as Steve Biko or diasporic scholars such as Frantz Fanon. These scholars and their association to movements such as Négritude, Pan-Africanism and the Black Consciousness Movement introduced radical ways of imagining and articulating blackness on the continent. A brief look at the concepts offers a necessary context for the ways in which Africans forged trans-continental enquiries into a collective theorising of blackness in Africa. This marked a departure point from the ways in which Africa was written about and discussed outside the continent (or inside the continent by settler colonialists). This demonstrates the unrelenting quest for self-definition and self-determination, of speaking, writing and theorising Africa in and by Africans.

Négritude is an ontological project that can be seen to have strived for a comprehension of blackness in Africa. Associated mainly with Martinican author and politician Aimé Césaire, Senegalese politician (and first post-independence president of Senegal) Léopold Senghor and Guianan poet Léon Damas, Négritude was another black African ontological project concerned with thinking the position of blackness in Africa. Largely an intellectual project conceptualised during an encounter between Afro-diasporic students in the late 1920s in France, Négritude was “the expression of a revolt against the historical situation of French

colonialism and racism... [and an] expression of the value of ‘blackness’”.⁶³ Négritude can be argued to have a dual purpose: it is both a revolt and an irritant against colonial supremacy, and simultaneously a discourse concerned with blackness and being in the world. Both have been accepted, with Césaire and Damas propagating the former, while Senghor “insisted more on articulating Négritude as a philosophical content, as ‘the sum total of the values of civilization of the Black World’, thus implying that it is an ontology, an aesthetics, an epistemology, or a politics”.⁶⁴ Négritude is thus the “being-in-the-world of the Negro”.⁶⁵ It is the black ontological side of Négritude that the thesis is interested in. By Senghor’s account, there is a vital force that precedes being and in fact constitutes being. Senghor also propagated a thinking of Négritude as a philosophy of African Art.

In addition to Négritude, Pan-Africanism is another movement and thought process that aimed to define and understand the precarious lived conditions of black people in Africa and its diaspora as a step towards eradicating this precarity. Olisanuche Esedebe offers a definition of Pan-Africanism as

a political and cultural phenomenon that regards Africa, Africans, and African descendants abroad as a unit. It seeks to regenerate and unify Africa and promote a feeling of oneness among the people of the African world. It glorifies the African past and inculcates pride in African values.⁶⁶

The supposed origin of Pan-Africanism as an African-American movement that began with the abolitionist movement makes it difficult to define.⁶⁷ As Esedebe has argued, African scholars have oftentimes had difficulty agreeing on a working definition purported by American scholars, and there are numerous differing definitions of Pan-Africanism amongst

⁶³ Diagne, “Négritude,” np.

⁶⁴ Diagne, np.

⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre cited in Diagne, np.

⁶⁶ Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776 - 1991*, 5.

⁶⁷ Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776 - 1991*; M’buyinga, *Pan-Africanism or Neo-Colonialism*.

African scholars themselves. The use of the term at a London conference on Pan-Africanism in 1990 – initiated by Trinidadian Henry Sylvester-Williams – is documented by some as the first use of the term.⁶⁸ Other scholars, such as Esedebe, however, argue a difference between the coining of the term and the widespread ideas of Pan-Africanism in 1770s in the U.S. He does acknowledge a discourse on the term at the Chicago Conference of 1893, and the disparate definitions and ideologies that were perceived to be the root of Pan-Africanism.⁶⁹

This outline of some of the tensions in definition and origin of Pan-Africanism, while merely exemplary and not extensive – are intended to outline the difficulty of an apparently African or black front across countries or continents. It is intended to show that while the thesis speaks about a collective African video art, it acknowledges these historical discrepancies of homogenisation. Despite this realisation, the thesis still looks at video art practices from different parts of the continent, for, despite their context and content specificities, they do share a common thread that might help us think blackness in Africa in enabling ways. There are obvious challenges to discussing Africa as a continent, and not acknowledging the multiple nations that form the whole. However, in a Pan-Africanist spirit, speaking about Africa enables an entry into trans-continental similarities, because while there are specifics to each context, on closer examination, they appear to be communicating echoing sensibilities about blackness and being in an apparently anti-colonial political and social condition.

In later decades, in the 1960s in South Africa, the anti-apartheid movement, the Black Consciousness Movement, attributed mainly to Steve Biko, was gaining prominence as a way to think blackness differently in an anti-black world. Biko's thinking was an amalgamation of thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. In a paper

⁶⁸ George Padmore cited in M'buyinga, *Pan-Africanism or Neo-Colonialism*, 28–29.

⁶⁹ Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776 - 1991*, 3–4.

delivered for a South African Student Organisation (SASO) meeting in 1971, Biko gave an outline of what Black Consciousness was and how it was mobilised and practiced by the organisation. He stated that

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realization that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, black (sic) are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black.⁷⁰

By the time the Black Consciousness Movement had been mobilised, it did not attempt to rectify the problematic apartheid government because "doing so implies acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves" – instead, "[b]lack are out to completely transform the system and to make it what they wish".⁷¹

Black Consciousness was predicated on the slogan, "Black man, you are on your own" as a quest to highlight the racist struggles in South Africa.⁷² This slogan was intended to demonstrate Biko's key aim to eliminate any white liberal agenda and any white liberals who aligned themselves with black people in the fight against apartheid. Biko was an advent believer in black people fighting their own fight, and saw white liberals as "the greatest racists for they refuse to credit us any intelligence to know what we want".⁷³ The intrusion of white liberalism of blackness's quest to eradicate anti-blackness was seen as an undermining of black people's ability to conceptualise the means and strategies of attaining their own freedom. What white liberal conquests insinuated for Biko was an anti-black mistrust in the

⁷⁰ Biko, "The Definition of Black Consciousness," np.

⁷¹ Biko, np.

⁷² Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 91.

⁷³ Biko, "The Definition of Black Consciousness," np.

capabilities and intellectual merit of black people to end apartheid oppression and was exemplary of “white power [presenting] itself as a totality not only provoking us but also controlling our responses to the provocation”.⁷⁴

The ontological project of Black Consciousness was aspirational for blackness to reach a status of “a free self”, a self that is positively inside the human, instead of outside of it.⁷⁵ In order to achieve this, black people are meant to shed any negative conception and images they have about themselves, conceptions that have been taught to them as a condition of their subjugation. Black Consciousness, therefore, tasked itself with “correcting false images” of black people that had been promoted in “culture, Education, religion, Economics”.⁷⁶ These false images maintained the conception of blackness as being outside the human. As such, Black Consciousness, through the writing of Biko, is seen to seek recognition of the humanism of black people. Biko writes that “white systems have produced throughout the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people” and continuously returns to this dichotomy of person, not person, or human and not human, where whiteness is equal to humanity and blackness is its opposite.⁷⁷ While in some essays Biko does not spend too much time on the humanism debate, but merely alludes to it in passing, in the essay “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity”, it is clear that humanism is an integral part of what he perceived to be the structures on which anti-blackness, or white racism, is built.⁷⁸

One key diasporic figure in the theorising of continental blackness can be found in the work of Martinican Frantz Fanon. Lewis Gordon posits that, “[i]n the late 1980s and throughout

⁷⁴ Biko, np.

⁷⁵ Biko, np.

⁷⁶ Biko, np.

⁷⁷ Biko, np.

⁷⁸ Biko, *I Write What I Like*.

the first decade of the twenty-first century, ‘Fanon Studies’ has come into its own in the American and British academies despite neglect of his work in France and many Francophone countries”.⁷⁹ It should be acknowledged that the same applies to certain Anglophone countries, including South Africa, where Fanon Studies became an integral part of transforming racial oppression in academia. Along with the writings of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness, *Black Skin, White Masks* – and to a lesser degree, the *Wretched of the Earth* – were cited in conversations that sought to transform the colonial curriculum in South African universities and academia.⁸⁰ As such, while it might appear peculiar to place Fanon, a Martinican scholar, under the heading of blackness in Africa, his contribution to the field should be considered in light of the popularity that he garnered in the continent in the past few decades. It is thus fitting to read him alongside other forms of black ontological examinations and explorations that existed in Africa.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon concerns himself with the ontology of blackness as it relates to whiteness and to colonialism. He does this through a number of approaches, including looking at the humanism of blackness as directly proportionate to its proximity to whiteness. He states that, “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language”.⁸¹ He equates blackness to a “crushing objecthood”, and in his famous essay, “The Fact of Blackness” – which Fred Moten argues is incorrectly translated and should be “The Case of Blackness” – he realises that he is “an object in the midst of other objects”.⁸² The objecthood of blackness lies in its forced inability to exist independent of whiteness – blackness is blackness only in relation to whiteness. And in this relationality, blackness has

⁷⁹ Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, 3.

⁸⁰ This is largely an observation made during my studies at the University of the Witwatersrand from 2005 to 2011 where lectures such as Thembinkosi Goniwe argued for an inclusion of Black Studies, through Fanon and Biko, in the History of Art curriculum.

⁸¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 8.

⁸² Fanon, 82; Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179.

historically been seen as a “corporeal malediction”, whose “prognosis” is both a curse and a disease that needs curing and exorcism.⁸³ Ultimately, blackness is what which should be feared.⁸⁴ When Fanon states that he “discovered [his] blackness” on a train after his being has been “taken by a racial epidermal schema” and his very existence reduced to the colour of his skin, he indicates that there was perhaps an ontology that he knew prior to that moment that was not attached to his blackness.⁸⁵ Blackness in that moment, by virtue of the fact that it is realised and not taken as a given, suggests a kind of imposition borne out of its relation to white racism or anti-blackness. Fanon does not suggest that prior to the realisation or discovery of his blackness, he was unaware of blackness as a potential ontology for black people. He in fact acknowledges the “legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*” that had in the past been attached to him and his kind.⁸⁶ However, this moment of a realisation of his blackness is cause for pause as it suggests that blackness as an ontology for black people is not given, but rather borne out of an encounter with violence (as shall be elaborated on below). It is through the violence of being singled-out because of the colour of his skin that Fanon attains a status of blackness, where blackness is outside the human, and where blackness is inferior to whiteness.

Blackness is that which, according to Fanon, is “overdetermined from without”, meaning it is given its inferior classification by an outside force, that is whiteness.⁸⁷ Blackness is that which is other to whiteness, which is the classification of ‘man’, or by extension, humanness.⁸⁸ In encountering a man who is not white, whiteness sees itself as not

⁸³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 84.

⁸⁴ Fanon makes this realisation in the oft-quoted passage “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Fanon, 84.

⁸⁵ Fanon, 84.

⁸⁶ Fanon, 84.

⁸⁷ Fanon, 87.

⁸⁸ A criticism that is made against black studies is its continued disregard of gender in its conversations of blackness. In arguing for an inclusion of blackness in the realm of humanness, it is often the ‘black man’ who is meant to stand in for all black people. In this particular translation of Fanon from the French, such is the case. However, Lewis Gordon offers an intriguing theory, that “[a] problem in Fanon studies in the Anglophone world has been the limitations of the English translations of his writings” (6). He further indicates that some translators have “often chosen the expression ‘the black man’

encountering a man, but “a new kind of man, a new genus”, a different kind of man, a different species, a black man who does not fall snugly within the normative classification of manhood, and humanness.⁸⁹ After much debate and scientific experiments, a reluctant decision was made, that “The Negro is a human being”.⁹⁰ However, this realisation did not afford blackness the same kind of human privileges that it had afforded whiteness. In other words, all that was gained was the classification of humanness without the treatment of humanity. Blackness as constituting humanness is evidently a precarious condition, one that has changed over time: “Two centuries ago I was lost to humanity, I was a slave forever. And then came men who said that it all had gone on far too long”, and then a semblance of humanity was afforded blackness.⁹¹ This exclusion of blackness from the normative conception of blackness will be adopted in the thesis, specifically in the third and fourth chapters on spectrality and sorcery. In the third chapter, this conception of humanness is explored through Jamaican philosopher, Sylvia Wynter, who extends Fanon’s thinking of blackness and humanness through notions of the “overrepresentation of man” and normative conceptions of humanness.⁹²

One key thing to acknowledge about these dominant discourses on blackness, both continental and diasporic, is the number of male theorists at the forefront of the conversations. Black women are hardly acknowledged as having contributed to Pan-Africanism, Négritude and Black Consciousness. Arguing the same, Deanan Sharpley-Whiting attests that Négritude’s “masculinist genealogy constructed by the poets and shored up by literary historians, critics, and Africanist philosophers continues to elide and minimize the presence and contributions of black women, namely their francophone counterparts, to

and ‘the white man’” where, were it to be directly translated, it should in fact be “‘the black’ and ‘the white’” (22).

⁸⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 87.

⁹⁰ Fanon, 90.

⁹¹ Fanon, 91.

⁹² Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.”

the movement's evolution".⁹³ Similarly, Mamphela Ramphele, Steve Biko's partner and active black woman in the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, articulates how the movement was continually articulated as a "black man's struggle" and never in terms of black womanhood.⁹⁴ In order for black women to garner any form of authority within the movement, they had to be given an honorary male status. As such, in addition to trying to think blackness through an African lens, and disarticulating it from its African-American (and diasporic) immediate association, there is clearly a necessity to think blackness not only through the 'Black Man' (a distinction that, for example, Achille Mbembe still does not offer in his *Critique of Black Reason*), but to think Black Womanhood as always already constituting blackness. The fourth chapter on the sorcerer offers some insight into the possibilities of reading blackness through black womanhood and their knowledge systems.

The thesis argues that there is a refusal undertaken by the concept of continental blackness. Steve Biko uses the term in 1971 where he sees Black Consciousness drawing strength from "the refusal by [its members] to progressively lose [themselves] in a world of colourlessness and amorphous common humanity".⁹⁵ Refusal as a strategy has since been adopted in contemporary continental artistic practice, including by the artists discussed in the thesis. Refusal is thus a means of resisting the conditions forced upon blackness by white supremacist structures. Tina Campt defines refusal as

a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibilities in the face of negation
i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and
unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminishing subjecthood with which one is
presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace

⁹³ Sharpley-Whiting, "Femme Négritude: Jane Nadal, 'La Depeche Africaine', and the Francophone New Negro," 10.

⁹⁴ Pumla Dineo Gqola; Ramphele Mamphela; K Yates, "This Little Bit of Madness: Mamphela Ramphele on Being Black and Transgressive."

⁹⁵ Biko, "The Definition of Black Consciousness," np.

the possibility of living otherwise.⁹⁶

She considers “*refusal* as a generative and capacious rubric for theorizing everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis on collective acts of resistance”.⁹⁷ Refusal is therefore a process of claiming agency and insisting on self-determination and self-authorship. It is a strategy of self-assertion that seeks to dictate the means of resistance on both a macro and micro level. Refusal is used as a mode of radicality, where radicality is “understood as the performance of a general critique of the proper”.⁹⁸

Julian Murphet describes refusal as concerning “a *subjective indication of unwillingness*”.⁹⁹ He tackles two different kinds of refusals: political refusal and aesthetic refusal and locates political refusal within the realm of ethics by concluding that political refusal is “political praxis as a performative *disengagement* from ongoing processes *because they are unethical*”.¹⁰⁰ As such, a refusal against racism can be seen as a refusal against the unethical structures of anti-blackness. Aesthetic refusal on the other hand, functions on an axis of negation.¹⁰¹ In all the works discussed in the thesis, we encounter a political (and ontological) refusal as it relates to blackness and the lived experiences of black people, to borrow Fanon’s term.¹⁰² Aesthetic refusal reveals itself more in The Machine chapter (through *is i am sky*) with the foregrounding of the otherwise hidden technological devices, and in The Sorcerer chapter with Saro-Wiwa’s pushing against some components of the Nollywood film industry.

Thusly, refusal as it appears in the thesis is a kind of poetics of resistance, where the multi-modal forms of anti-black resistance are taken into account and given the space and

⁹⁶ Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” 83 Emphasis in original.

⁹⁷ Campt, 80.

⁹⁸ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

⁹⁹ Murphet, “On Refusal,” vii.

¹⁰⁰ Murphet, vii.

¹⁰¹ Murphet, vii.

¹⁰² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

representations they deserve. What is taken more into consideration is what Campt calls “black refusal”, a kind of refusal practiced and exhibited by black people against anti-black structures.¹⁰³ The concept of continental refusal, by extension, signals to anti-colonial modes of refusals and their intersections with race, gender, class, ethnicity, among other complexities. Following from both Campt and Murphet, refusal is seen to operate on the level of negation (of oppressive superstructures) and of unwillingness (to readily conform to the daily impositions on black lived experiences), and further suggests undermining (the rules imposed by such structures) as a characteristic of continental modes of refusals.

Achille Mbembe and Contemporary Continental Black Studies

*To understand the category of Blackness, one must understand the history of the modern world, its forms of conquest and exploitation, the manifold responses to its systems of oppression, the forms of resistance and voicing, the totality and its fragments.*¹⁰⁴

In contemporary discourse on the political history of Africa and its relation to continental black lived experiences, Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe is often consulted on numerous occasions, sometimes with criticism as he continually portrays black people as perpetrators of their own suffering, as is the case in “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome”.¹⁰⁵ Mbembe’s work is largely rooted in African politics and economics. He borrows from the political history of the continent to make his argument for the condition of past and contemporary continental black lived experiences. In this strategy, Mbembe builds on the work of earlier scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, Aimé

¹⁰³ Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” 86.

¹⁰⁴ Dubois, “Translator’s Introduction,” x.

¹⁰⁵ Mbembe, “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome.”

Cesaire and Leopold Senghor. Mbembe shall be used throughout the thesis with a strained, ambivalence – sometimes admiring the work, sometimes finding fault with it. Recent accounts of blackness are, as the thesis does, also in conversation to African-American scholarship, where theories of the Black Radical Tradition and Critical Race Theory are never far behind. It is thus with this in mind that a call is made to carve out a contemporary African black studies that is in conversation with these theories, but can stand independent of them.

Mbembe looks at the intersections between “self, life and sovereignty” and always returns to modes of being as correlating directly to power relations.¹⁰⁶ In his recent book on black ontology, *Critique of Black Reason*, he offers a vibrant discussion about blackness in Africa, and is therefore central to some of the discussions in the following chapters.¹⁰⁷ In the book, Mbembe charts blackness in Africa through connected histories of Africa, the U.S., Europe and the Caribbean to indicate the ways in which blackness is often perceived through its close relationship to its politics. Mbembe imagines a new and interesting account of blackness. He argues a new concept of blackness, that is the universalisation of blackness, which he terms the “Becoming Black of the world”.¹⁰⁸ He states that’s

Across early capitalism, the term ‘Black’ referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession for the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible). Now, for the first time in human history, the term ‘Black’ has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new form of existence and expanded to the entire planet, if what I call the Becoming Black of the world.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 131–32.

¹⁰⁷ Mbembe, *Crit. Black Reason*.

¹⁰⁸ Mbembe, 5–6.

¹⁰⁹ Mbembe, 6.

This becoming black of the world is the condition in which modern forms of capital have relegated citizens of the world, not all black, the state of the imposed inferiority of blackness. However, I argue that the world can never be black, because in as much as Mbembe argues that global politics and economics may be catching up with the exploitation of blackness on a grander scale and to include not only people who are black, the black people within that group will still receive a worse form of subjugation, of exploitation, because of their history that has always made sure that they remain inferior. I opposed his statement that “[r]acism without races’ is now surfacing in many countries. To practice racism today even as it is rendered conceptually unthinkable, ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ have replaced ‘biology’”.¹¹⁰ Discrimination and subjugation based on difference has always existed and did not come with the advent of racism. As such, what Mbembe is speaking of is a continuation of that form of discrimination, and again, maybe it is adopting some of the subjugatory strategies of racial discrimination, but I argue that they should never be seen as the same thing, for, even in the new wave of the globalisation of blackness (or the ills of blackness), blackness will still bare the grunt of that arrangement. This touches on whether blackness or the black condition is migratable – or whether it is specific to black people (although it can be argued that we need to see the difference between blackness and black people in the same way there is a difference between people and being). Mbembe’s “Becoming Black of the World” takes us back to the question, whether we can have blackness without black people?¹¹¹ Mbembe’s blackness is often understood as Afro-pessimistic, however, it can also be understood through the writings of early scholarship on Négritude and Pan-Africanism.

¹¹⁰ Mbembe, 7.

¹¹¹ Mbembe, 6.

Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism

African accounts of blackness sit appositionally to their diasporic equivalents, including, but not limited to, Caribbean black studies, and African-American accounts of black studies. Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter helps us think race through our conception of humanism, which is often at the forefront of these diasporic investigations of blackness.¹¹² She does this by positioning blackness within the debates around who belongs inside or outside of the classification of human and how this has been instrumental in the colonial and othering project.¹¹³ She alerts us to the fact that humanism is itself a construct, and that the interiority and exteriority – that is, inside or outside – of humanism is measured against a “Western bourgeois ... conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself”.¹¹⁴ The outcome is that the “overrepresentation” of a particular kind of humanism dictates who *is* human and who is not. In this scenario, blackness is relegated the status of non-humanism or outside the human. These classifications in the end dictate how a society is structured and the roles that people are meant to play within those structures. The normative conception of human is therefore able to participate in formal politics in a manner that is acceptable to the individual. Those outside the human meet a different fate, one that does not acknowledge their right to participate freely and willingly in these political structures.

The ideas of blackness and humanism is one of the key points of discussion and contention discussed in contemporary scholarship on blackness and its ontology, or lack thereof. There are two key opposing theories of blackness in African-American scholarship, namely, Afro-

¹¹² Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.”

¹¹³ Wynter.

¹¹⁴ Wynter, 260.

pessimism and Black Optimism, and they both pivot, in different ways, around the classification of blackness and humanness.¹¹⁵ Afro-pessimism argues for the non-ontology of blackness and posits that blackness should not aim to be located within the realm of humanness. Black Optimism, on the other hand argues that blackness *is* ontological, and has always already occupied a space within humanism. The characteristic of these two lines of thinking, according to David Marriott, can be divided into a thinking that wants to think blackness through “a drama of freedom and alterity, recognition, and authenticity”.¹¹⁶ This line of thinking seeks “to apprehend blackness as an existential concept: decolonization and humanism, for example, each has its *telos* of desired outcome, and this end is the overall prospect for a free community of human beings in the wake of history”.¹¹⁷ Black Optimism seeks to place blackness within the realm of humanism and to prove the ontological validity of blackness. The attempt at locating blackness within the realm of humanism is referred to, albeit with critique, as “black humanism” by Calvin Warren and as a “new humanism” or “deferred universal humanism” by Marriott.¹¹⁸ Black Optimism, associated mainly with the work of Fred Moten, falls within this line of thinking and does not propose an opposition to humanism, but seeks to argue that blackness is human, but is merely excluded from that category by anti-black structures. To this effect, Moten states that

blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that is ontology’s anti- and ante-foundation, ontology’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 220.

¹¹⁶ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 35.

¹¹⁷ Marriott, 36.

¹¹⁸ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 4; Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 36; 37.

¹¹⁹ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

According to Moten, blackness existed independent of the classification of ontology, which is used to other blackness and to relegate it a state of less than human, inhuman, or simply nothing.

Afro-pessimism – found mainly in the work of Jared Sexton, Frank B. Wilderson III, Calvin Warren and David Marriott – on the other hand, “accentuates the political or ethico-theoretical limits” of thinking the postcolonial moment through black humanism.¹²⁰ It sees Black Optimist’s concern with humanism as damaging to the project that black people undergo to escape anti-blackness. It sees ontology as inherently anti-black as it has never considered blackness other than through the idea of lack. R.L states that,

[f]or the Afro-pessimists, the black subject is exiled from the human relation, which is predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life itself. Thus black existence is marked as an ontological absence, posited as sentient object and devoid of any positive relationality, in contradistinction to the human subject’s presence.¹²¹

The limit of Black Optimism, for the Afro-pessimist, is premised on the belief that blackness has strategically been placed outside the human and any attempt at rectifying that, Marriott argues, “opens the question of a non-humanistic opening to humanism”.¹²² He posits that “racism interrupts the movement towards the human, and paradoxically makes ontology irrelevant for understanding black existence, then clearly ethics and politics (insofar as they are grounded on this humanism) cannot simply be invoked, even negatively, as a model for thinking black existence”.¹²³ Warren argues that there “is a deep understanding of the relationship between blackness and ontology” because all ontology is preceded by blackness.

¹²⁰ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 36.

¹²¹ R.L., “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death,” np.

¹²² Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 36.

¹²³ Marriott, 36.

Blackness is in fact that which gives rise to ontology.¹²⁴ Warren mobilises Fanon, and argues for a separation between “ontology and existence”, arguing that existence does not mean that one has ontology or being. He refers to this as “black existence”, as a kind of “existence as non-being”.¹²⁵ Despite the differences between Black Optimism and Afro-pessimism, Marriott argues against the belief that “the relationship between these two types of thought is simply oppositional or contradictory”.¹²⁶ He argues that “[t]here is virtually no compatibility between the optimist’s language and the pessimist’s” and that “they frequently coexist in one and the same individual”.¹²⁷

Another thought process, which does not fully fall within Afro-pessimism or Black Optimism is what Fred Moten refers to as Mysticism and Calvin Warren refers to as Moten’s “Black Mysticism”.¹²⁸ Black Mysticism argues that there is no relationship between blackness and ontology, and that blackness should always be read independent of ontology. Black mysticism bridges the gap between Black Optimism’s advocacy for black humanism and Afro-Pessimists instance of the non-ontology of blackness.¹²⁹ This offering seeks to depart from the constant need to locate blackness within ontology, and ontology that, by all accounts, as argued by Afro-pessimists and Black Optimists, has always had a strained relationship to blackness and black people. As Warren surmises, Moten “wants to abandon, if not destroy, traditional ontology and metaphysics – since it is ontology that distorts blackness and limits it to nothing more than other forms of being”.¹³⁰ Afro-pessimists wish to imagine the non-ontology of blackness because ontological projects, which are arguable always already predicated on racial politics and encounters, have been used to subjugate black

¹²⁴ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 221.

¹²⁵ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 13.

¹²⁶ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 37.

¹²⁷ Marriott, “Judging Fanon,” np.

¹²⁸ Calvin Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit”; Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

¹²⁹ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 220.

¹³⁰ Warren, 221.

people. As such, blackness should not endeavour to be located inside a thought structure that has always been used against it. Black Optimists on the other hand, while they agree with the exclusionary and imperialist nature of western ontology, argue that western notions of ontologies should transform and find new vocabularies and methodologies of correcting their previous problematic exclusions of blackness from ontology and normative modes of being.

These accounts, including Afro-pessimism, Black Optimism, and even Black Mysticism in its efforts to do away with ontology, are predicated on the idea that ontology is a largely Euro-American philosophy that has always excluded blackness. This, however, does not account for the idea posited by this thesis and other scholars that (diasporic) blackness and ontology have always gone hand in hand, and that ontology is not a specifically western idea.¹³¹ In *Paget Henry and African Ontology*, Teodros Kiros states that

Ontology is the study of Being, existence and becoming, and Africans have long held their commitment to Ontology far longer than their Western counterparts. African Ontology as part of African philosophy has continued to organize African life since it came into being as early as 2500 years ago.¹³²

With this in mind, getting rid of ontology because it has always excluded blackness is not fully accurate. A statement could be made that the ontology that is discussed is European ontology, and that African thinking has its own valid form of ontology. Africans philosophy has always considered ontology at the forefront of its civilisation and everyday life.

Considering the critique of the lack of distinction between African-American conceptions of blackness and its continental counterpart, it is worth asking: why still concentrate on these

¹³¹ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*; Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*.

¹³² Kiros, "Paget Henry and African Ontology."

black-diasporic debates? In *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, Louis Chude-Sokei argues that

notable about the European avant-garde was that they mediated Africa through African American and to a lesser extent Afro-Caribbean cultures in a way that many blacks wouldn't do. There was still a strong legacy of shame as well as a strong sense of cultural superiority in relationship to Africa and its peoples among diaspora blacks in this historical period.¹³³

It is therefore pertinent to acknowledge the long history of favouring African-American scholarship over African scholarship. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I lean into the work of Moten, Weheliye and Chude-Sokei, among others, because it potentiates generative conversations, especially in relation to sound, that drive the thesis forward in useful ways. It is useful to align the thesis with these scholars, especially considering the immeasurable amount of work that they are doing to understand blackness in the contemporary condition. As Moten states, “the most exciting and generative advance in black critical theory ... is the announcement and enactment of Afro-pessimism in the work of Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton”.¹³⁴ To extend this statement, the same point can be made about the contributions of scholars such as Christina Sharpe, Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman. A further point to be made is the cyclical nature of Afro-diasporic discourse, where there is a continuous and fluid borrowing from each other. This is evident, for instance, in music, where jazz trumpeter Don Cherry (*Dedication to Thomas Mafumo*, 1991) and drummer and composer Max Roach (*All Africa and Tears for Johannesburg*, 1960) borrow explicitly from or pay homage to African events, people or music, and where South African flautist and saxophonist Zim Ngqawana then later borrows from Roach in his *Zimphonic Suites*. More examples abound, including the collaboration between South African vocalist Miriam Makeba and African-American Harry Belafonte, *An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba* (1960),

¹³³ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 29.

¹³⁴ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

which includes renditions of some South African struggle songs that will be discussed in Chapter 1.¹³⁵ African-American jazz musicians were being influenced by some West African countries' gaining of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, and this sparked a nationalist camaraderie amongst them. This was manifested through music and these musicians overtly making reference to African musicology as a mode of and aspiring towards, African customs and political accomplishments.

An example that is more in line with the ideas in the thesis is the relationship between African-American Sun Ra and South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape, where Sun Ra borrows from African mythology in his focus on Egyptology, and Bopape later borrows from Sun Ra in *is i am sky*. In theory, Tina Campt, who forms a crucial basis for the second chapter on fugitivity, refers to South African artist Santu Mofokeng in her *Listening to Images*, while Frank B Wilderson III's *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* refers to his time as a member of the South African paramilitary group, uMkhonto We Sizwe. Furthermore, Lewis Gordon has had close affiliation with Rhodes University in South Africa. As such, the thesis stands strong in its alignment with black diasporic scholarship without risking "[t]he problem of subordinated theoretical identity", as Lewis Gordon would put it.¹³⁶

Furthermore, it is an unfortunate burden for African scholars to be limited in terms of the works that they can and should cite. In the spirit of 'decolonising one's bibliography', African scholars are expected to limit their citations of mostly white male West-Euro-North-American scholars and philosophers. The perception is that one should always attempt to undo past normative knowledge systems by paying attention to the knowledges and writings

¹³⁵ Struggle songs will form the contextual basis of chapter 2 (The Machine).

¹³⁶ Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, 5.

of lesser-known African scholars, who are largely inaccessible. The issue is doubly troublesome for African women scholars who are not only expected to decolonise the racial aspect of their bibliographies, but also the gender aspect, as they are expected to find and cite black women African scholars. This is a largely unwritten rule, but one that comes up extensively in verbal conversations with peers, lecturers and examinations. It is to be understood that the notion of decolonising one's bibliography is a generative concept that assists scholars of non-West-Euro-North-American descent to look at their own histories and knowledge systems in their efforts to contribute to those knowledges. However, this should not be a way of limiting their interests with what is happening and being produced in other parts of the world. While the thesis both desires and begrudges the burden of decolonising the bibliography – only in those instances when the expectation of the decolonisation is burdensome, which is not always – it acknowledges the luxury that others have of existing outside the legacy of the burden. Not only does this luxury make it possible for others to write what and as they desire, but they exalt in numerous possibilities of celebration in those rare instances where they do in fact cite writers whose knowledge systems are different from theirs.

This strategy of making links, while acknowledging the structural differences, between slavery (in the US, for, as Patterson has indicated, slavery was present in many societies, including in Africa), and the conditions in the colonies is not new.¹³⁷ In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe oscillates between European political society, the American slave plantation, before finally resting on the conditions in the colonies and during the apartheid regime. He triangulates between these moments, making linkages where they exist, and proclaiming notable differences. It is with this in mind that the thesis, critically and in good conscious,

¹³⁷ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

refers to the work of Moten, Weheliye, Campt and others, in its analysis of the selected African video art works.

Alternative Explorations of Continental Blackness: Afrofuturism

The tensions between the dominance of African-American scholarship and its migration to a particularly black African condition persist to date. A good case study for this is the rapid growth of the idea of Afrofuturism and its popularity amongst discussions on blackness in the continent and the diaspora. Afrofuturism is chosen as a case study partly due to what some may perceive to be the Afrofuturistic nature of the works discussed in the thesis. It is thus essential to indicate the reasons Afrofuturism was abandoned as a reference point to the artworks as a way of fostering independent scholarship outside the confines of this catchall and popular phrase and movement. The use of Afrofuturism as a catchall phrase is argued to be detrimental to the knowledge production of Africans as artworks and cultural products that make reference to or use science fiction, conflate temporalities, use technology or the spiritual and the otherworldly are automatically conflated under this umbrella term, thus not acknowledging the nuances inherent in their distinction. The term Afrofuturism is attributed to cultural critic Mark Dery in 1994, defines literature, music, film and other forms of visual art produced by African-Americans, such as Sun Ra, Samuel R. Delaney and Octavia E. Butler, who make use of science fiction and technological advancement to provide alternative imagined and escapist spaces, such as outer space, that redefine and reimagine the current position of black people on earth.¹³⁸ While Dery is credited with coining the term, works that bore Afrofuturist traits existed long before 1993, as Kodwo Eshun argues in “Motion Capture

¹³⁸ Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” 14.

(Interview)".¹³⁹ Afrofuturism in artistic practice is indicative of “contemporary artists’ deployment of strategies of improvisation and mythmaking, [as a way of] mobilizing difference as a source of power”.¹⁴⁰ It is a way for blackness where “the future provides a space for us too reimagine ourselves”.¹⁴¹ Samuel R. Delany attends to the futurity for blackness that is potentiated through the intersections between blackness and science fiction. He states that

[w]e need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly. And nothing gives such profusion and richness of images of our tomorrows – however much they made need to be revised – as science fiction.¹⁴²

Historically, this futurity and notion of tomorrow was associated with the African-American black experience, and the failure to distinguish the multiplicity of black experiences in the work has caused tension in the use and adoption of the term.

It is worth noting that, the following observation does not serve as a critique of Afrofuturism, but rather a look at the manners in which a supposedly African-American concept (or rather terminology) is seen to be adopted and assimilated by African scholars and cultural practitioners. There is no critique on this strategy, but merely a curiosity in the tensions that arise in the many conversations that have arisen to date. Some of the debates in the thesis bear a close resemblance to discussions about Afrofuturism. The fugitivity of continental blackness that will be discussed in Chapter 2 might be seen to correlate to Michelle D.

¹³⁹ Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*.

¹⁴⁰ Whitley, “The Place Is Space: Afrofuturism’s Transnational Geographies,” 21.

¹⁴¹ Julian Henriques; Herald Offer; “Afrofuturism, Fiction and Technology,” 111.

¹⁴² Delany, “The Necessity of Tomorrow(S),” 115.

Commander's speculative discussion of Afro-Atlantic flight in the works of Octavia Butler, among others, in *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*.¹⁴³ However, despite the many similarities with some Afrofuturist thinking, the thesis moves away from that theorisation and terminology as a way of giving voice to the many independently and concurrently developed practices on the continent. While this statement might seem peculiar – moving away from Afrofuturism to give space for African modes of thinking in light of the largely African-American theories and theorist consulted in the thesis – the thesis reserves the right to engage what is generative for the purposes of the argument, and to abandon that which is not. The departure from Afrofuturism is partly motivated by what Louis Chude-Sokei calls “the often-dominant concerns of first-world blacks”, where blackness in the west takes precedence over continental blackness.¹⁴⁴

In recent years, the go-to theories for discussions about blackness and alternativeness is Afrofuturism, which, has its limitations because of its continual reference to its supposed African-American origins. While Afrofuturism might certainly offer enabling entry points into the discussions in this thesis, it is also crippling reading it in the African context because it becomes perceived as a belated form of African-American scholarship. The results of which are that Africa is perceived as always borrow from elsewhere instead of generating its own discourses and theories. The thesis in fact argues that issues of futurity, alternativeness, and their relationship to blackness certainly precede the contemporary African Afrofuturist turn. The contemporary African Afrofuturist turn begins with African practitioners referring explicitly and insistently to the ‘movement’ in scholarship, artistic practice and exhibition making. Some of the artists discussed in the thesis – Dineo Seshee Bopape, Kiluanji Kia

¹⁴³ Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*.

¹⁴⁴ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 15.

Henda and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum – have been discussed in relation to Afrofuturism.¹⁴⁵ Sunstrum has expressed an aversion of this connection, and this has been exemplified in her writings, such as the essay “Afro-mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices”, wherein she introduces the notion of African Futures and African Futurism as a departure from Afrofuturism and a specifically continental concern.¹⁴⁶ Bopape, on the other hand, openly refers to Afrofuturists such as Sun Ra, as in the video *is i am sky*, but prefers not to be confined within the limits of Afrofuturism.¹⁴⁷

Kodwo Eshun has explored this relationship between African-American accounts of Afrofuturism and their application (or lack thereof) in Africa.¹⁴⁸ He invites a different reading and understanding of the movement from an African perspective. He argues that predictions of Africa’s future are imposed on the continent in economics. Data, surveys and statistics are used by the West to paint a dismal future for the continent. He states that it is essential to draw a distinction between Afrofuturism as a political tool used to capture Africa’s future and Afrofuturism as an artistic aesthetic that aims to liberate blackness from racial discrimination. From an alternative perspective, there is a need to free Afrofuturism from the optimistic illusions that accompany it. In an inaugural lecture series “Continental Afrofutures”, Eshun expressed his observation of African art practitioners (artists, curators, academics) and their recent, on-going and still unresolved tackling of Afrofuturism and its relation to the African

¹⁴⁵ Kia Henda has been included in numerous exhibitions about Afrofuturism, such as *A Shadow Took Shape*, New Museum, Harlem. Furthermore, Dineo Seshee Bopape refers to Sun Ra in *is i am sky*.

¹⁴⁶ Sunstrum, “Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices.”

¹⁴⁷ Interview with the artist. In an interview with Zimbabwean artist Gerald Machona about his video work, *Vabvakure*, he voiced concern about being labelled an Afrofuturist and how that might lend itself to being seen as aspiring to popular western thought processes (personal communication, 2014). His approach to mythology from an African point of view, independent of African-American culture, might be seen as a poor imitation of the origins of Afrofuturism. It was therefore a surprise when, over a year later, Machona’s work (while being publicised for the forthcoming solo exhibition at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg) was advertised as Afrofuturistic. This change of heart is indicative of the tensions in associations with Afrofuturism by African practitioners.

¹⁴⁸ Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism”; Eshun, “Stealing One’s Own Corpse: Afrofuturism as a Speculative Heresy”; Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*.

continent.¹⁴⁹ In the first lecture of the series, titled *Lecture 1: Laingian Science Fiction*, Eshun attributed this scepticism to the ubiquitous understanding of Afrofuturism as concerned with Afro-diasporic issues: the mode is discussed in relation to African-American, Canadian, British and Caribbean cultural production. He gives an example of Kojo Laing, a Ghanaian writer, whose novel *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992) was produced and published prior to Mark Dery's 'coining' of the term Afrofuturism in 1994, and yet, his novel was never discussed in light of Afrofuturism under the same rubric as African-American novelists such as Octavia Butler. Instead, Laingian science fiction was compared and equated to South America magical realism, arguably problematically perceived to be a more pagan, less sophisticated form of its North-American equivalent.¹⁵⁰ The historical failure to consider Laing's (and other writers such as Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri) under the rubric of Afrofuturism may be the cause for concern and revolt for some contemporary African practitioners. Additionally, Julien Henriques incites us to question the 'Afro' in Afrofuturism. In an interview with artist Herald Offer, he states that

Afrofuturism is a science-fiction story, a story about the future, which very often involves technologies yet to come alongside technologies that are already here. And the 'Afro' part of Afrofuturism basically makes the whole enterprise grounded in a particular, I would say, mythical – or fictional – place of Africa. Afrofuturism is a quest both to return home and for a new diasporic future in space.¹⁵¹

Making a poignant observation, Henriques continues that “[t]he 'Afro' in Afrofuturism figures very differently in the imagination of those outside the continent than, let's say, of contemporary Nigerians, for example”.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Eshun, Kodwo. (27 February 2016), Lecture 1: Laingian Science Fiction. Showroom, London.

¹⁵⁰ Latin American scholar Ramirez indicates this case and expresses concern about the othering strategies brought about by these classifications.

¹⁵¹ Julian Henriques; Herald Offer;, “Afrofuturism, Fiction and Technology,” 99.

¹⁵² Julian Henriques; Herald Offer;, 104–5.

Despite these criticisms and calls for more criticality in the use of Afrofuturism and its application to African practices, the 2013 exhibition *The Shadows Took Shape* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in fact sought to indicate the transnational and black diasporic nature of the movement. The exhibition (and its accompanying catalogue) was an exploration of the historical and contemporary tenets of Afrofuturistic thinking. According to the exhibition curators Naima J. Keith and Zoé Whitley, the exhibition attempted to look at the spread of Afrofuturism in the African diaspora. Whitley speaks of two types of Afrofuturists: “accidental and self-proclaimed”.¹⁵³ Supposedly, the accidental Afrofuturist is one who unintentionally falls under the rubric of Afrofuturism – this means that their work already displays Afrofuturist signification, and it is through subsequent discussions that their work is read in that light. Alternatively, the self-proclaimed Afrofuturist claims the title from the onset, perhaps even deliberately producing work that ‘ought’ to be read as Afrofuturistic. Both the “accidental and self-proclaimed” Afrofuturist face some form of resistance. The use of “accidental adopters of Afrofuturism” suggests that they have in fact *adopted* Afrofuturism, albeit unintentionally. This allows us to further question whether everything that is seen to have similar traits as Afrofuturism should be seen as Afrofuturistic. From this statement, it is no wonder that African practitioners, for instance, might be opposed to the terminology, because the statement suggests that they entered a space (that is adopted a genre or movement), a practice that already existed. In this way, African practitioners may be seen as agents who could have contributed to the birth of the practice, but are rather subservient to that which has already been established. While the curators argue that they seek to indicate the global reach of Afrofuturism, an insistence is still made to its close link to the African-American experience. To that effect, Keith states that

even as this exhibition argues that Afrofuturism has the power to reach beyond borders of

¹⁵³ Whitley, “The Place Is Space: Afrofuturism’s Transnational Geographies,” 20.

nationhood, it traces the powerful, discernible visual characteristics of the movement that connect back to the American experience and conditions of living.¹⁵⁴

Whitley critiques the exhibitions *Spacecraft Icarus 13: Narratives of Progress from Elsewhere* (2011) at the BAK in the Netherlands and *Superpower: Africa in Science Fiction* (2012) at the Arnolfini gallery in England and contests the distancing from Afrofuturism that these two exhibitions had.¹⁵⁵ She finds fault with the fact that *Spacecraft* does not make mention of Afrofuturism “despite being an exhibition about science fiction and Africa”.¹⁵⁶ Here, a presupposition is made, that the intersection between science fiction and Africa in artworks *should* automatically be perceived as Afrofuturistic. Afrofuturism is also seen to bear some of the gender discrepancies of black movements such as Black Consciousness and Négritude discussed above. Alondra Nelson states that “in the genealogy of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra is the unequivocal progenitor of a post-black tomorrow. It is the mothers who are uncertain. As the shadows took shape, some were eclipsed”.¹⁵⁷ Nelson’s comment relates to Eshun’s argument of the exclusion of certain geographies in the definition and birth of Afrofuturist strategies. Similarly, Tegan Bistrow blindly falls prey to talking about Afrofuturism and its endeavour to place “the black man in space”.¹⁵⁸ This is indicative of the normalised use of gendered language that is automatically exclusionary – in this case, black women are immediately excluded from participating in what Bistrow advises is a revolutionary move towards “an escape from the externally imposed definitions of what it means to be black (or exotically African) in Western culture”.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Keith, “Looking for the Invisible,” 13.

¹⁵⁵ Whitley, “The Place Is Space: Afrofuturism’s Transnational Geographies,” 19.

¹⁵⁶ Whitley, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Nelson, “Out of the Shadows, Into the Stars,” 41.

¹⁵⁸ Bistrow, “We Want the Funk: What Is Afrofuturism to Africa?,” 81.

¹⁵⁹ Bistrow, 81.

Video Art and the Development of African Cinema

The history and development of western video art, or the moving image, has its roots in the 1960s in America.¹⁶⁰ In her introduction to *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, Tanya Leighton maps out the birth of American video art and its roots in artistic experimentation that lead to the transgression from cinema and television. She argues that video art was not conceived in the 1960s, but rather that the 60s was a period “when artists’ film production emerged as a recognisable category of film art”.¹⁶¹ She explains the initial scepticism towards the medium, which later lost merit as video slowly became popularised due to the exponential international growth of and access to technology. For Leighton, video art is the intersection between visual art, cinema and television.¹⁶² To that end, she “explores what happens to the moving image when it is transposed from the black box to the white cube, when cinema is ‘exhibited’ by being re-sited within a museum or gallery context”.¹⁶³ In addition to glancing at the history of American video art, primarily through the analysis of video artworks by seminal artists such as Nam June Paik and Andy Warhol,¹⁶⁴ she questions “[h]ow ... the projected image [found] its way into the museum and into the art historical discourse of modernity”.¹⁶⁵ Through the renewed accessibility to video technology in the 20th century, “a new spirit of experimentation in art” was ushered in as artists gained access to the previously expensive technology that was reserved for film and television professionals.¹⁶⁶

The introduction of video is seen to have been “primarily made in relation to the medium of television and in response to its ubiquity” and functioned as a “fusion between visual art, new

¹⁶⁰ Chin, “Contemplating the Navel: The Use and Abuses of Video Art”; Leighton, “Introduction.”

¹⁶¹ Leighton, “Introduction,” 13–14.

¹⁶² Leighton, 8.

¹⁶³ Leighton, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Early practitioners of video art include Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and David Hall.

¹⁶⁵ Leighton, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Rush, *Video Art*, 7.

technologies and the moving image”.¹⁶⁷ This relationship to television was, however, not without contention. Catherine Elwes argues that in the US, the birth of video art was partly motivated by the fact that other moving image platforms such as television and cinema were seen to construct prejudiced stereotypes that were gendered, racialised and class-based.¹⁶⁸ Video became a subversive medium with which these othered narratives could be rectified. It had the potential to be a transgressive of moving image-making. She states that, “[t]hese popular cultural forms produced narrowly defined human typology that promoted social prejudice – racism, sexism and homophobia” and that “[v]ideo artists... appropriated and manipulated those same stereotypical images as a deconstructive strategy for exposing the distortions and inequalities of media representation”.¹⁶⁹ For this reason, the technological component of video, from “colour processing, digital editing and image layering” was closely tied in with the “social and political engagement” that is potentiated and mobilised through video.¹⁷⁰ Arlindo Machado’s text on the emergence of video art in Brazil indicates a different engagement with the social aspect of the medium in a context other than the US. Emerging only three years after its debut in the US, video art in Brazil was inspired by a form of “radical television, produced and broadcast on closed circuit, independent of the economic and cultural models of conventional broadcasting”.¹⁷¹ At the heart of these modes of production was the ease with which Brazilian artist had access to this new technology, which became more affordable and accessible than other mediums. Video offered “the best options in terms of production costs”, making it “possible for independent authors and non-profit groups to explore autonomous cultural projects”.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Shirin Neshat, “Foreword,” x; xi.

¹⁶⁸ Catherine Elwes, *Video Art A Guid. Tour*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Catherine Elwes, 3.

¹⁷⁰ Catherine Elwes, 3.

¹⁷¹ Machado, “Video Art: The Brazilian Adventure,” 225.

¹⁷² Machado, 225; Masquelier, “Encounter With A Road Siren: Machines, Bodies and Commodities In the Imagination of a Mawri Healer.”

In addition to issues of access and technology that video art practice brought to the fore, artists had found a different and innovative ways to execute their practice. Video has been used by artists as “extension[s] of their own bodies and as participants in performances, linking the physical and the conceptual from the beginning”.¹⁷³ What was interesting about video is how it altered the manner in which reality could be narrated and represented. The medium “expanded the possibilities of narrative, producing linear and non-linear autobiographies and futuristic fantasies, defining the political and redefining the sexual, and exploring personal and cultural identity”.¹⁷⁴ It is these properties of video and what it helps us imagine differently that are of particular interest in the thesis. What is also of interest is the way in which the technological aspect of video is utilised to communicate this imagining differently. As Michael Rush indicates, “[s]everal of video’s early practitioners were very engaged in technological advances such as synthesizers, image processing, computer scanning and so forth”.¹⁷⁵ Artists engaged in this interest in the technological aspect of the medium, including Nam June Paik, were concerned with blurring the boundaries of these technologies and exploring ways in which they can offer a reimagined version of reality. Narratives became malleable, and the time-based component of video art magnified the way in which time can be experienced differently. The shift in the exploration of time shifted from artists wanting to “capture time as it was experienced, right here and now,” to artists becoming “interested in manipulating time, breaking the barriers between past, present and future” and a representation of “multiple layers of time, time as it really is experienced in out waking and sleeping states” persists to this day.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Rush, *Video Art*, 8.

¹⁷⁴ Rush, 8.

¹⁷⁵ Rush, 8.

¹⁷⁶ Rush, 10.

In “Contemplating the Navel: The Use and Abuse of Video Art”, Darly Chin unpacks the position of the artist in the social engagement aspect of the video practice and reflects on “the idea of the artist as a social agent, explicating a procedure of information output”.¹⁷⁷ This correlation between the artist as part of the technological component of video, and the artist as an agent through which society can be engaged through technology is illuminated in Paik, who argued that:

Problem is not really socialism or capitalism but technology, you know – how we manage that. For instance, technological forecasting, future research – I am very interested in that. They need us artists, to make that sort of information available to the public. Even New York Times will not print Rand Corporation Report, because it is so boring. Like McLuhan say, we are antennae for changing society. But not only antenna – we also have output capacity, to humanize technology (sic).¹⁷⁸

The relationship between the artist, technology and social commentary will be explored further in the second first chapter on technology through Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *is i am sky*.

A key component of early video art, along with its relationship to the television, was its relationship to performance art. Artists, including Vito Acconci, would insert themselves in their video work through performative gestures.¹⁷⁹ The inclusion of the self in these works led Rosalind Krauss, in her famous essay “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism”, to proclaim that “The medium of video is narcissism”.¹⁸⁰ Despite Krauss’s critique of the inclusion of the body in video art practices as narcissistic, this inclusion had generative results in the feminist video art as feminist artists exploited the relationship between performance, the body and technology. In a discussion about technology-based art and its relationship to feminism, Holly Laing Willis argues that technology “has drastically influenced the agendas and

¹⁷⁷ Chin, “Contemplating the Navel: The Use and Abuses of Video Art,” 63.

¹⁷⁸ Paik cited in Chin, 63.

¹⁷⁹ Rush, *Video Art*, 10.

¹⁸⁰ Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 50.

possibilities of political resistance in general, and of feminist artmaking practices in particular”.¹⁸¹ This happens is numerous levels, including the quotidian uses of technology, and its relationship to the body. Willis argues that feminist artists, which would include artists such as Adrian Piper, Lorraine O’Grady,¹⁸² Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum and Julia Scher

have examined the industrial apparatus and various canons, in search of a contestatory practice that could be oppositional but not merely at the level of form; they have disregarded notions of proper image quality and coherent narrative structure dictated both by ‘quality’ and Hollywood; they have debunked the modernist privileging of the original and the singular to consider the series and repetition; they have distorted the fetishized female body into grotesque bodies; and they have destroyed or multiplied the spaces of traditional reception in a move designed in part to fracture the Cartesian point of view.¹⁸³

If, following Elwes, we imagine that “every generation and nationality has used video as a personal medium, an electronic mirror with which to investigate social identity – femininity, masculinity, ethnicity, and sexuality”, then the medium continues to be a generative means with which we can explore the social and political implication of the notions of blackness in Africa.

One of moving image’s transgression from the cinematic was due to the illusory representation of ‘real’ time in cinema. Borrowing from Leighton’s strategy of arriving at video art through film and television, I will look at the historical significance of African cinema as an entry point to a discussion of African video art. There is little documentation and theorisation of the history of video art in Africa.¹⁸⁴ There is, however, documentation of

¹⁸¹ Willis, “Out of Hand: Experimental Media Practices by Women,” 2.

¹⁸² O’Grady is discussed here not as a video artists, but rather in her capacity as a performance artist who uses video to accentuate her performances.

¹⁸³ Willis, “Out of Hand: Experimental Media Practices by Women,” 4.

¹⁸⁴ Greslé, “Precarious Video: Historical Events, Trauma and Memory in South African Video Art (Jo Ractcliffe, Penny

the introduction of television and cinema in the continent.¹⁸⁵ In order to comprehend the introduction and politics of video art as moving image, it is useful to contextualise the medium within the history of African cinema. A discussion about a history of African cinema and moving image requires a consideration of two key components. Firstly, one needs to consider the ways in which Africa was portrayed in cinema and secondly, the way in which Africans represented themselves in cinema. According to Nwachukwu Ukadike, “African cinema was not controlled by Africans until the 1960s when Africans began to achieve independence and make their own feature films”.¹⁸⁶ David Murphy and Patrick Williams, in agreement, argue that “African film, with the exception of the burgeoning Egyptian industry and a few films made in places like South Africa, is almost entirely a postcolonial phenomenon”.¹⁸⁷ Ukadike investigates the emergence of a “true black cinema”, thus setting it apart from other modes of African cinema; those that are produced by colonial structures often as a mode of reinforcing stereotypical African imagery.¹⁸⁸ In so doing, Ukadike examines the “‘alternative’ means by which black African cinema has moved beyond a chronic domination to espouse its own position within a decolonizing process”.¹⁸⁹

As with most discussions about Africa, thinking about African cinema within the context of pre-colonialism, colonialism and postcolonialism provides an enabling, although strained, framework. As Murphy and Williams argue, “[a]lthough the periodising model of the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial is not the only relevant history here, there is no way of understanding Africa, or – most importantly for our concerns – its cinema, without the

Siopis, Berni Searle , Minnette Vari)”; Kala, “Introduction.”

¹⁸⁵ Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*; Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*; Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*.

¹⁸⁶ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*, 13.

¹⁸⁸ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 2.

¹⁸⁹ Ukadike, 2.

awareness of the past and present effects of imperialism on the continent”.¹⁹⁰ Since film did not exist anywhere in the world including precolonial Africa, it features in the history of African cinema through the ways in which filmmakers reference and portray precolonial Africa.¹⁹¹ The effects of the Scramble for Africa influenced the growth of cinema in Africa, with Egypt and South Africa receiving their first screening in 1896, a year after the Lumière brothers’ screening in Paris, with the rest of the continent following suit as they were colonised, some gaining access to cinema as late as the 1920s.¹⁹² This early history of African cinema is plagued with stereotypical representations of Africa and Africans, with the intention to justify and reinforce colonial domination of the continent.¹⁹³ These early films (such as *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905) and the Tarzan films) “when not straight forward racist, at least confirmed colonialist stereotypes about Africans and African culture among the cinema going populations of the West, and as such contributed towards the ideological justification of the colonial enterprise in a period when its legitimacy was increasingly being questioned”.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, film was used in Africa to reinforce a superior and paternalistic image of the west to Africans.¹⁹⁵ African cinema scholars agree that the birth of African cinema that aimed to deviate from these stereotypical depictions is rooted in the 1950s and the 1960s, a period where African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana were beginning to gain independence from British, Senegalese, Portuguese and French colonisers.¹⁹⁶

A discussion that homogenises the entire African continent, such as a discussion about African cinema must acknowledge the multiplicity of the continent and consider the different

¹⁹⁰ Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*, 7.

¹⁹¹ Murphy, David; Williams, 7.

¹⁹² Murphy, David; Williams, 11.

¹⁹³ Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*; Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*.

¹⁹⁴ Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*, 11.

¹⁹⁵ Murphy, David; Williams, 11.

¹⁹⁶ Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*; Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*; Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*.

social and political make up of each country. Since the end of colonialism marks an important time in African cinema, one strategy used to consider the topic is through dividing film production into Anglophone, Arabophone, Francophone, and Lusophone Africa. Some similarities between countries with the same coloniser have become evident, such as the dominance of Francophone Africa (Senegal and Cameroon) in early African cinema history. Arguments are that, France's domination in Africa was motivated by the idea of the colonies adopting and assimilating to French culture. As such, the French government was instrumental in maintaining infrastructures in the colonies even after the granting of independence. Places like Senegal, therefore, continued to have film production in the colonies due to the systems instated by the French. Inversely, the Portuguese colonial strategy was that of not empowering people in their colonies. Filmmakers from Guinea-Bissau, for instance, are absent in the history of early African cinema, with Flora Gomes, who studied in Cuba, being perceived as the sole representative. Lusophone Africa - mimicking Cuban style film-making – is known for its revolutionary style films.¹⁹⁷

Themes explored in this cinema varied. Since its birth was at the height of decolonisation, African filmmakers were concerned with the nuances of the decolonial process. Following that, their oeuvre widened, and began to include moments of post-independence Africa – from women's roles in society (as in the case of the work of Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène), to the difference between rural and urban life, to precolonial Africa, and the effects of the new black elite who were seen to still serve the colonial master through neo-colonial governmental pursuits. In addition to the political quest often attributed early African films, there was a concurrent desire to grow into a specifically African cinematic aesthetic, and conversations about what aesthetic, filmic, videographic, and socio-political form that

¹⁹⁷ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 4.

would take were rife. Because African cinema was finally being produced for Africans by Africans, it became a means to undo past colonial circumscriptions as directors and theorists began to characterise a true African cinema. An underlying framework that was essential to this production of a true black cinema is the aesthetics of the filmic genre, and quests to discover or develop a true African cinematic aesthetic prospered. There were numerous propositions of what the emancipated, decolonised (that is outside the confines of colonial propagandist narratives and aesthetics), African cinema would take. Hyginus Ekwuazi proposed a decolonial African cinema and “a film language rooted in both traditional pictorial composition and African culture”.¹⁹⁸ For Ukadike, the “new black African cinema concerns itself with the role film can play in building African society”.¹⁹⁹ As such, new black African cinema could potentially exhibit the reality of Africa and Africanness. Furthermore, common in early black African cinema is “the depiction of situations as they exist and the identification of the struggling masses as undisputed heroes who have undertaken as their task to ‘right the wrongs’ in their society”.²⁰⁰ It therefore took on a reparative African representation when presented to both an African and a non-African audience. The films, while made with African audiences in mind, were also meant to be presented to an audience that had, up until that point, been exposed only to stereotypical depictions of Africa and Africans.

As with any discussion that looks at the history of a vast geographical location, theories about what constitutes African cinema abound with clashes and disagreements. Directors Sembène and fellow Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty are at odds, while theorists such as Murphy and Williams oppose some of the theories forwarded by Diawara and Ukadike. This attests to the multiplicity of African cinematic historiographies. There are three main

¹⁹⁸ Cited in Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*, 34.

¹⁹⁹ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Ukadike, 8.

categorisations of African cinema, which are often perceived as problematic: the return to the source (mainly propagated by Diawara), social realism and colonial confrontation.²⁰¹ Other key components of African cinema are depictions of the supernatural and spirituality. Soulemayne Cisse's *Yeelen* occurs completely in a supernatural world, while Gomes's *Po di sangui* breaches the overlaps between the supernatural world and "the unpleasant realities of the late twentieth century".²⁰² The constant return to and depiction of the spiritual in African cinema is echoed in Nollywood, a later video-film industry often credited to Nigeria and Ghana. Due to its obvious reference to witchcraft and the supernatural, and its 'low-tech' aesthetic and production quality, Nollywood is seen to contrast the elitist auteur-driven films of yesteryear. Nomusa Makhubu argues that "Nollywood video-film necessarily subverts the godly status of the auteur (it has not been artisanal), is ahistorical, and refuses neat genre categorisation".²⁰³

The otherworldly – depictions of the supernatural, the occult, witchcraft and belief in ancestors – is not only a trait of the less supposedly auteur-driven western style feature films. Contemporary filmmakers such as the Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Bekolo, in *Les Saignattes* (*The Bloodettes*) (1995) and Kenyan director Mbithi Masya's *Kati Kati* (2016) attest to the ongoing concern with the realities of African life explored through notions of the supernatural, a depiction of African spiritual economies, and, specific to *Kati Kati*, the spectral. The enigmatic and seminal *Les Saignattes* is a prime example of African science fiction and a concern with African notions of futurity. Set in 2025 Cameroon, the film presents a dark, dystopian and eerie future African city with all its beauty and destructions. We follow two women, Majorie and Choucho who, at the beginning of the film realise the

²⁰¹ Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*; Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*, 138.

²⁰² Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*, 134.

²⁰³ Makhubu, "The Fantastic Subject: A Visio-Cultural Study of Nollywood Video-Film," 26.

power of their sexuality and use it as an attempt to bring corrupt black male dictators to justice. There are intersecting notions of politics, sexuality, power and the supernatural; the latter manifests largely after the appearance of Mevungu, a Cameroonian female ritual, thus putting forward black women's spiritual practices in the articulation of black lived experiences and politics of refusal and resistance in the continent.²⁰⁴ This strategy of the intersections between African spiritual economies, black women's spiritualities and black women's place in society is further explored in the last chapter of the thesis.

While Murphy and Williams argue that Bekolo as a newer generation African filmmaker is less interested in the social realist and political aspects of African life, an argument can be made to the contrary and, as exemplified in *Les Saignattes*, Bekolo's films still bears some of the same traits as his predecessors – reminiscent of Sembène's critique of neocolonialism and the new black elite, and, also echoing Sembene's exploration of the role of women in Africa's revolutions. Other prime examples of African science fiction films are the South African feature film, *District 9* (2009) directed by Neill Blomkamp. The film alludes to a failed post-independence Pan-Africanism that was propagated by Sembène and his kind. In it, we see a discrimination across African national lines as South Africans' xenophobic tendencies are brought to the fore in a post-independent, post-apocalyptic African city. The history of a true black Africa cinema, to borrow from Ukadike, demonstrates a concern with a continental black ontology that attempted to repair the damages done to blackness through anti-black, stereotypical depictions of Africa and Africans.

²⁰⁴ Brotherdeacon, "The Bloodettes: Atop the Sheets, Between the Lines_Dir. by Jean-Pierre Bekolo," np.

African Video Art

The period of Bekolo's *Les Saignattes* and early Nollywood cinema coincides somewhat with the little available history of African video art. In her thesis, *Precarious Video: Historical Events, Trauma and Memory in South African Video Art* (Jo Ractcliffe, Penny Siopis, Berni Searle, Minnette Vari), Yvette Greslé sets out to contextualise the history of video art in South Africa.²⁰⁵ While hers is not a historical outline of South African video art, she does notice a dearth of adequate documentation of the use of the medium in the country. She notes how race, class and gender have played a significant role in the access to means of video production and dissemination. The trajectory of South African video art indicates how the medium was used to promote black feminist strategies and to combat apartheid anti-black representations of blackness and black womanhood.²⁰⁶ Artists such as Berni Seale and Tracey Rose used the medium to present a different mode of black feminist artistic performative representation. Elsewhere, in Cameroon, Goddy Leye was inserting himself in the history of African video art.²⁰⁷ In the early 1990s, Leye, along with a number of art practitioners, travelled West and East Africa, filming at differing moments and conducting video art workshops at different locations. And in 2009, video artists Jude Anogwih, Oyindamola Fakeye and Emeka Ogboh started Video Art Network Lagos (VANLagos), a new media art organisation based in Lagos intended to showcase media art in Nigeria. Their first exhibition, *Identity: An Imagined State*, an exhibition of video artworks featuring works by African and South American artists was showcased in 2009 at the prominent Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA Lagos) and was accompanied by a catalogue with a contribution by Leye.

²⁰⁵ Greslé, "Precarious Video: Historical Events, Trauma and Memory in South African Video Art (Jo Ractcliffe, Penny Siopis, Berni Searle, Minnette Vari)."

²⁰⁶ Malatjie, "Framing the Artwork of Tracey Rose and Berni Searle through Black Feminism."

²⁰⁷ Kala, "Introduction," 7.

Conversations about video artwork in Africa have gained a lot of traction in the past couple of years, however, these are oftentimes within the context of practice rather than theory. The Visual Arts Network of South Africa (VANSA) collaborated with a few organisations in Africa for the *Boda Boda Lounge Project: From Space (Scope) to Place (Position)* (2016). As an extension of Leye's Art Bakery trans-continental travel project, Boda Boda was a way of fostering Pan-Africanist notions of collectivity and communal participation.²⁰⁸ The medium of video, due to its ease of access, was a mode with which African art consumers located in different parts of the continent, could collectively and simultaneously participate in a single mode of art consumption. The Boda Boda Lounge Project's publication comprised academic essays, interviews with artists who work in video (including Dineo Seshee Bopape) and articles on the medium. Today, video art festivals and platforms in the continent abound. The Addis Video Art Festival (AVAF) is an Ethiopian video festival started by Ethiopian video artists Ezra Wube in 2015. Cape Town artist Matty Roodt has adopted the model of the one-night, no-budget, pop-up video exhibition, Bring Your Own Beamer. Founded by Dutch-Brazilian visual artist Rafaël Rozendaal, the model is that one finds a space in any location around the world, invites artists to the location to project their work where and if they can find space for it. Additional platforms include Afro-Pixel, which is held during the Dak'art Biennale in Dakar at Ker Thiossane, an organisation that focuses on African media art. Analogue Eye: Video Art Africa, Mobile Drive-in & Pop-up Cinema founded by photographer Brett Meistre in 2014 has held pop up video screenings of African art in South Africa, Austria and Germany. And, Centre Soleil D'Afrique in Mali, hosted by Hama Goro, concentrates on disseminating artistic practice to Mali's villages through the use of the moving image. African video art has also become a topic of engagement in international institutions. The exhibition *Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa* (2016) at

²⁰⁸ Kala, 4.

the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art featured works by Berni Searle, Theo Eshetu, Yinka Shonibare, Sue Williamson, Moataz Nasr and Sammy Baloji and aimed to showcase video art by African artists and artists from its diaspora.

The decision to concentrate on video artwork in the thesis is motivated in part by the fact that little has been written that accounts for this versatile history. While the thesis does not aim to give a historical account of continental video art, it aims to make a valuable contribution to what exists. It does this not by continental videographic historiography, but rather by concentrating on the nuances in the works that are being made. One key reason for concentrating on video art is the conversations of movement, stasis, sound, temporalities that are always already inherent in the videographic. While other mediums such as painting, drawing and sculpture can open up a conversation about sound, movement and time, none do so to the degree that the data, time, audio and visual-based medium of video is able to. For instance, drawings and paintings by the South African painter Gerard Sekoto potentiate a conversation about music through his depiction of township musicians and Parisian jazz clubs. Works such as the painting *Song of the Pick* (1947) make a correlation between music, blackness and labour under the apartheid regime. Furthermore, his township scenes of quotidian township life during the same period are pregnant with stillness and slowness and can be read in relation to time and its experience. This form of sound that emanates from a still image is what Tina Campt refers to as “phonic substance”, as “*the sound inherent to an image; one that defines or creates it, that is neither contingent upon nor necessarily preceding it; not simply a sound played over, behind or in relation to an image; one that emanates from the image itself*”.²⁰⁹ Video provides an added layer to the contemporary concern in black studies of looking at blackness and time, and blackness and sound. Through

²⁰⁹ Campt, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal,” 81 emphasis in original.

the medium, movement and time are not only left to the imagination, but are depicted durationally through the technological nature of the medium. Sound and the sonic are depicted (or not depicted, as is the case in silent videos) differently to how they are depicted in two dimensional objects. Thusly, a different kind of phonic substance is at play, and an exploration to those nuances are seen to add to the ongoing debate of continental black studies.

Methodology

In September of 2013, I was invited by Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg to curate an exhibition of video artworks from the collection of notable South African video art collector, Emille Stipp. The exhibition, *it began with a walk*, or more aptly put, the screening, took place in a cinema context at the Bioscope with the intention of providing viewers a different, and perhaps more complete experience of viewing the artworks (from beginning to end). The exhibition featured works by Robin Rhode, Kemang wa Lehulere, Moshekwa Langa, Penny Siopis, Dineo Seshee Bopape, and a collaborative piece by William Kentridge, Deborah Bell and Robert Hodgins. It first and foremost considered “the implications of curating a video art exhibition outside of the traditional gallery context”.²¹⁰ Thus continued my intrigue into the nature, exhibition and discussion of contemporary African video art. My intrigue was, however, piqued much earlier in my Master’s Thesis, *Framing the Artwork of Tracey Rose and Berni Searle through Black Feminism*.²¹¹ In this thesis, more attention was given to inserting black feminist discourse in the history of South African art by Black women than in the videographic nature of their works discussed – *Snow White* (2001) by Searle and *Ciao Bella* (2001) by Rose.

²¹⁰ Malatjie, “it began with a walk,” 4.

²¹¹ Malatjie, “Framing the Artwork of Tracey Rose and Berni Searle through Black Feminism.”

I have since curated two additional video art exhibitions: *commute with intuitive instinct* (2013) and *suspension of disbelief* (2015), both at Brundyn + Gallery in Cape Town. In these exhibitions, including *it began with a walk* and others that were not exclusively about video art, I began my relationship with the four case studies discussed in the thesis.²¹² As such it is through my own curatorial practice – as well as through sitting on the Addis Video Art Festival selection committee and contributing to the Boda Boda Lounge Project publication – that an interest in the themes in the thesis were sparked. In the end, a decision was however made not to embark on a practice-based PhD where my own practical relationship with the work would be foregrounded. Instead, I opted to concentrate solely on the discursive nature of the works – although curatorial practice and exhibition-making are discursive in themselves – and what they might communicate to us about continental blackness. Foregrounding my practical and curatorial practice would have added an additional component to the engagement with the work, and a decision was made to the contrary so as to concentrate solely and more deeply on the works at stake. The curatorial is mentioned here because it has informed the manner in which the works were selected and has revealed a fascinating relationship to artistic practice that unfolds over time. From the initial encounter with the works through research or exhibition, to curating the works and communicating with the artists about them for the purpose of drafting press releases and giving walkabouts to the general public, and later, to engaging in deep academic analysis and engagement with the work that has led to a immersive ontological conquest, this unfolding has been an intriguing one to see and experience. This process is again mentioned here to signal to the thesis methodology that surpasses the time allocated to conducting theoretical PhD research and to signal to its possibilities of existing outside the confines of non-public engagement.

²¹² Bopape's *is i am sky* was part of *it began with a walk*; Sunstrum's *spin* was part of *SURVEY* (2014, Brundyn+ Gallery); *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* was part of Henda's solo exhibition *As God Wants and the Devil Likes It* (2014, Brundyn + Gallery); and *Phyllis* was a stand-alone screening in Brundyn+ Gallery's video room in 2014.

The thesis employs a number of methodologies, including analysis of archival material, literary analysis, cultural analysis and formal analyses of the artistic objects selected (the latter is done through a concentration on the videographic component of the works, the style of video, the visuals in the work as well as the use of the phonic and sonic). This methodology is paired with an analysis of the themes that are evidently present in the work, as well as those that are hidden and require a deeper engagement. The chapters are therefore divided into three main sections: firstly, a brief description of the artworks discussed; secondly, a historical background that the artworks references, from struggle songs, to mining in Southern Africa, to the Angolan revolution, to the birth of the Nollywood film industry; and lastly, a deep ontological engagement with aspects of the videos. In each chapter, the artwork analysis is highly predicated on giving an overview of the entire video, and then slowing down on specific moments, scenes, or events as a way of tackling broader concerns of either fugitivity, spectrality or sorcery. This particular methodology works well with *spin*, *Polyhedra*, *Phyllis*, and *Concrete Affections – Zopo Lady* as the videos' narrative structures lend themselves to such analysis. However, the encounter with *is i am sky* at first glance appears to steer the methodology in a different direction. A concentration on one segment is impossible because the video is constructed in such a way that refuses segmentation. The video does not present itself in a way that one can easily locate particular moments in it. Instead, it is a continuous unfolding where time is unmarkable. It is difficult to contain within a particular moment because it is so fluid. The work, therefore, does not exist in such a way that it can be frozen, unlike the other works that permit a kind of freezing. While *is i am sky* refuses this kind of segmentation, in order to write about it, it is necessary to break it down and attempt that freezing. As such, due to its abstract nature, the frozen moments are

themselves abstract and oftentimes indescribable. Or rather, the language used to describe it has to be similar to the language of its abstraction.

The thesis employs a methodology rooted in the notion of poetics. According to Lyn Hejinian, “poetics is a site where other spheres of cultural activity and other kinds of art-making enter *into* poetry” but are not poetry.²¹³ In the thesis, poetics is understood “as a contemporary genre of writing and artistic-intellectual practice”.²¹⁴ Bearing in mind that poetics “was (and is still) just beginning to discover its possibilities, even as it was attempting to create terminology, name its objects of concerns, devise methodologies, and generate an arena for collaborative (and sometimes contentious conversation”, the thesis has carved out its own approach to what it terms poetics.²¹⁵ The poetics of the thesis lies in its interdisciplinary methodology. While highly located in the intersection between visual cultures, continental politics and historiographies, and continental and diasporic black studies, its oscillation between these different forms is brought together through deep ontological analysis presented in the works, and in sometimes lyrical language used to express the concerns of the case studies. The thesis uses a method of slowing down on specific aspects of the videos and using them as signposts for deep ontological contemplation. An approach of poetics is thus employed as a mode of aesthetic and political refusal, where the thesis adopts slightly poetic writing and rejoinders as an attempt to undermine concretised modes of writing about blackness and the African continent. This is not to suggest or assume a newness of the poetics employed in the thesis; instead, it is a difference that has been ongoing in black and African studies, beginning with the work of Édouard Glissant and his conversations with Manthia Diawara.²¹⁶ When reading the thesis,

²¹³ Watten, “Introduction,” 2.

²¹⁴ Watten, 1.

²¹⁵ Watten, 1.

²¹⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; Diawara, “Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009).”

there are transition between historical accounts, artwork description and analysis. Furthermore, seemingly non-consequential sounds and videographic marks are presented as points of focus that open up a broader conversation related to continental blackness. This strategy allows for wigs to be seen as a kind of technology (as shall be argued in chapter 4) and where, in the same chapter, spiritual practices are modes of social and political refusals and resistance. In this sense, poetics as a genre of writing about continental blackness is a means of self-determination, where the writing simultaneously follows traditional rules of writing, while departing from them when desired. Poetics is therefore seen as a creative and innovative approach to a given conquest – and the idea of refusal as a poetics of resistance is unearthing innovative and radical modes of imagining approaches of pushing back.

Furthermore, I conducted interviews with three of the four artists discussed in the thesis: Dineo Seshee Bopape, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum and Zina Saro-Wiwa. Kiluanji Jia Henda was not available for an interview. The interviews were structured around getting a better sense of the artworks, and communicating the exact motivations, themes and processes employed by the artists. The interview material was used primarily in the contextualisation of each chapter – including struggle songs in *is i am sky*, mining in Southern Africa and Eadweard Muybridge in *spin*, and Nollywood in *Phyllis*. These contexts might seem disparate at first, but they all converge at the point of continental blackness, thus signalling to the multiplicity of continental blackness as an point of discussion in contemporary artistic practice. The discursive components of the chapters are drawn mainly from the author's interpretation of the works, with the assistance of some key signalled themes – such as blackness and nothingness in *is i am sky* – from the artists. In addition to the interviews and the visual cultural formal analysis of the works discussed, the thesis employs some strategies employed by scholars who are concerned with finding enabling methodologies for the

discussion of blackness and African scholarship. In addition to notions of poetics and refusal discussed above, the work of Fred Moten on appositionality, Tina Campt on listening to images, and Louis Chude-Sokei on blackness as method are useful for the purposes of the thesis.

In *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Fred Moten offers a methodology of appositionality in reading the slave-master relationship in the U.S. The notion of appositionality is taken from Moten's accounts of Frederick Douglas and the relationship between the slave and the slaver owner. It is a kind of signalling to the two-way relationship that exists between slave and slave owner, and indicates that in as much as "the subject acts on the object" the resistance of the "object" comes through appositionally through black performance. Moten refers to this tension as an "appositional encounter" where the slave finds means of non-visible, low frequency modes of refusal.²¹⁷ Moten further states that,

[w]hereas a powerful strain of postcolonial theory structures itself as *the reversal* of that direction and its gaze, I'm interested in the discovery of a necessary *appositionality* in this encounter, an almost hidden step (to the side and back) or gesture, a glance or glancing blow, that is the condition of possibility of a genuine aesthetic representation and analysis – in painting and prose – of that encounter.²¹⁸

At continuous play in the thesis methodology is a kind of temporal appositionality, where different temporal demarcations are simultaneously given and refused. The appositionality in the thesis can be understood as an offshoot of decolonial methodology, where African knowledge systems are considered adequate modes of intellectual thought. An example exists in the use of spirituality to carve out a discussion about the ontology of continental blackness. There is importance given to spiritual based works and African spiritual economies. Despite

²¹⁷ Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 22.

²¹⁸ Moten, 34.

the wealth of information on these practices, little is written on its relationship to the ontology of continental blackness. As Njoki Nathani Wane states that “[w]hile collections on spirituality and religion lay thickly on shelves and continue to invade the Internet, information on African women and spirituality is scant”.²¹⁹ Wane attributes the lack of written work on African spirituality to the method of distribution of these knowledges, most prominently the fact that “spiritual knowledge has been passed down both through word of mouth and observation”.²²⁰

These accounts of spirituality and African women are limited in scope, and do not exceed the pointing out the roots of African spiritual practices and their link to land and the cosmos. I, on the other hand, am more interested in what these accounts can tell us about the temporal and geographical context in which they are practiced, and what we can glean from African women’s spiritual practices and its link to social, political and economic make-ups of a particular system. As such, Nadesha Gayle’s text, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a form of resistance and activism” is timely.²²¹ However, like the many other texts before it, Gayle’s is rooted in North American scholarship – Canada, to be exact – further leaving the gap of these discussions as they pertain to the African context. In the thesis, the methodology of appositionality is deployed to indicate the mutually beneficial relationship between African and African-American scholarship. It is seeing Africa as falling victim to undermining tendencies not only from non-black scholarship, but, unintentionally and merely by default, to black diasporic scholarship that does not come from the continent. As such, appositionality as it is employed in the thesis is seen as a further quest to achieve intellectual status, not only to past colonial structures, but also to fellow black scholarship.

²¹⁹ Wane, “African Women and Spirituality: Connections Between Thought and Education,” 136.

²²⁰ Wane, “African Women and Spirituality: Connections Between Thought and Education.”

²²¹ Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism,” 2011.

The thesis borrows from Tina Campt's *Listening to Images* and pays close attention to the counterintuition presented in the videos – a counterintuition to the ways in which blackness is meant to be represented and how the lived experiences of blackness are assumed to be. This counterintuition is indicative of how blackness goes against the grain – or against the grid, as articulated in Chapter 2 – of its predetermined imposition and capture. Campt pays attention to “the limits of contemporary discourse of resistance”.²²² In the same vein, the thesis considers this limit to exist in the reading of imaginative, poetic and innovative representations of resistance in the works discussed in the thesis. While the works might site overtly political movements – such as South African struggle songs and their aversion to the apartheid government and the Angolan Revolution – the stillness and subdued nature of the images suggests the contrary. The ruptures in the videos, the indication of the violence of anti-blackness, is presented as a kind of stillness, through the silence and slowness of *Phyllis* and *spin* and through the absences and voids in *is i am sky* and *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*. A further theme that is linked with these silences and this slowness is exemplified through Bopape's quest to represent boredom, and to work through a video artwork and through robust issues through the notion of boredom.

Following from Campt, boredom, stillness and a slowed down pace run through the nature of the artworks. The thesis borrows this methodology that is evident in both Campt and the works discussed by slowing down on specific moments, specific sounds, and specific aesthetic mistakes to help communicate the nature of contemporary continental modes of refusals. By so doing, this methodology indicates that “attending to the infra-ordinary [‘everyday practices we don't always notice and whose seeming insignificance requires excessive attention’] and the quotidian reveals why the trivial, the mundane, or the banal are

²²² Campt, *Listening to Images*, 10.

in fact essential to the lives of the dispossessed and the possibility of black futurity”.²²³ In these “low frequencies” of the works and black life, a boredom presents itself as a kind of tension that enables strategies of black refusal. By attending to the “low frequencies” of quotidian black life and contemporary continental artistic practice, the thesis finds a way of giving voice to the different kinds of refusals that artists are employing in their works. These low frequencies indicate a kind of cyclical and continually unfolding mode of artistic expression where artists are finding different and enabling ways of articulating their grievances. Furthermore, these “low frequencies” give a new face to what is considered as resistance, or refusal, and attends to the continued ontological concerns of black practitioners on the continent. There is an inherent aesthetic refusal in the methodology employed by both the artists and the thesis, such as a refusal to background formal aesthetic components that would otherwise be foregrounded in *is i sky*, and a refusal to represent the bodily violence that comes with the revolutionary moment in *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*.

In his “Introduction: Blackness as Method”, Louis Chude-Sokei expresses scepticism to the “endless gestures of resistance and subversion, radicalism and refusal all in the name of blackness”.²²⁴ This scepticism is motivated in part by “the increased institutionalization and commodification of that blackness in and around academia and the broader world of culture and media commentary”.²²⁵ He states that

a global explosion of black cultural production and critical/theoretical reflection from Europe and the UK to the Caribbean and the African continent; various new subfields and specializations marked by this generation’s penchant for neologism as they establish difference from each other and from their past, and establish the particular stakes of their

²²³ Campt, 8.

²²⁴ Louis Chude-Sokei, “Introduction: Blackness as Method,” 1.

²²⁵ Louis Chude-Sokei, 1.

mode and spaces of engagement. One might even call it a renaissance.²²⁶

While this statement is delivered in part as a critique of these neologisms and these subfields deployed to articulate new scholarship on blackness, the thesis finds this renaissance and its introduction of terms such as “black technopoetics” and “fugitivity” quite generative and endearing. The thesis thus adopts this methodology, firstly by borrowing from the growing studies on blackness that these neologisms have managed to generate in the past few years, and to account for the wealth of intellectual and creative ways of discussing blackness. The third chapter, *The Spectre*, in fact follows suit and proposes a new conception of spectrality that is specific to continental blackness through the notion of black spectrality. Furthermore, Chapter 4 leans in on a coined theme and framework called ‘African spiritual economies’ to account for the importance of spirituality in the everyday lived experiences of black people on the continent. However, the thesis methodology does not rely first and foremost on introducing more neologisms – although this would be an acceptable strategy in itself. Instead, it borrows from existing terminologies and theories that are coming out of this renaissance that Chude-Sokei speaks of. The thesis in fact opposes the notion of a collectivity of blackness that Chude-Sokei struggles against. He states that “[o]ne wonders if, after all this time and generations of self-critique, blackness remains merely a convenient metaphor for difference we insist on holding together by are unwilling to fully interrogate”.²²⁷ As has been stated above, the thesis concerns itself with differentiating between continental blackness and African-American conceptions of blackness and to acknowledge the hierarchy that may exist if these two experiences and scholarships are conflated.

²²⁶ Louis Chude-Sokei, 1.

²²⁷ Louis Chude-Sokei, 2.

The problematic use of “blackness as promiscuous contemporary metaphor and sign” stated by Chude-Sokei is shared in this thesis, specifically with regard to Mbembe’s notion of the “becoming Black of the world” discussed above.²²⁸ However, as Chude-Sokei concludes, this promiscuity, if seen positively as a kind of multiplicity of articulations and theorisations, “is a flickering sign of renewal fed by the insistence that there is something still worth renewing in the face of such violence and so much precarity”.²²⁹ It is with this in mind that blackness is employed as a method in the thesis to signal to this ongoing violence and precarity, but more importantly, to signal to the enabling modes of poetic resistance and black refusals against these forced conditions. Blackness as method is therefore not employed to add to a popular methodology in academia as a kind of co-opting of blackness to attain relevance and to add to the hype. Instead, it is employed as a generative strategy that unearths modalities and experiences that in the past were not given space of proper expression and meaningful engagement. Blackness as method is read and used alongside what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “blackness’s disruptive force”.²³⁰ What this means is that blackness as method disrupts normative structures and systems that dictate what blackness is meant to look and sound like, and how blackness should be discussed. Blackness as method highlights blackness’s disruptive force as what which, by design, does not fit within these systems, and thus subsequently always already enacts kinds of refusals against these very systems. Blackness as method and the hype surrounding it is seen as an excitement by a generation who have finally found innovative ways of articulating their experiences through generative subfields and neologisms that might have been very difficult in the past. Lastly, the thesis functions on a mode of repetition. Certain ideas will appear in more than one chapter, such as the idea of sound, and that of technology. But, sound appears more in Chapter 4 (while appearing briefly

²²⁸ Louis Chude-Sokei, 2.

²²⁹ Louis Chude-Sokei, 2.

²³⁰ Ferreira da Silva, “1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” 1.

in all the other chapters) and technology will appear more in Chapter 1 and to a lesser degree in all the other chapters.

Chapter 1: The Machine: *is i am sky* and the Technology of Blackness

Introduction

Dineo Seshee Bopape's interdisciplinary practice oscillates from concerns with spirituality, an advocacy for a multiplicity of temporalities, and issues pertaining to land and landlessness. She accomplishes this by marrying a vast array of symbolic materials, which she arranges into immersive intuitive constellation-like installations. This later manifests through various channels, most commonly through large-scale installations and moving image, and oftentimes through an amalgamation of the two. At the centre of Bopape's practice is a continual recourse to history and memory as it pertains to Afro-diasporic events and experiences. At the forefront of this is seeking similarities in ritual and spiritual practices and how they are channelled in the lived experiences of black people in different parts of the world. Her recourse to Afro-diasporic spiritualities has been seen to feature in works such as *Mabu, Mubu, Mmu* (2018) – which is different ways of saying soil in the Sotho-based languages of South Africa – and alluded to in *:indeed it may very well be the _____ itself* (2016), specifically with the recurring inclusion of Santera voodoo symbolisms. In these works, Bopape uses chalk to draw Santera-like symbols, including circles separated into four and sometimes bearing crosses and smaller circles, onto compressed heaps of soil. In other moments, she carves these shapes into the earth structure, and inserts healing crystals such as amethyst and jade, as well as healing herbs such as sage and hibiscus. The remnants of the speculative rituals – although still rooted in reality because the act of assembling these installations can be read as rituals in themselves – resemble shrines of appeasing ancestors across most African communities. Through the centrality of Afro-diasporic and worldly healing practices, Bopape compels us to imagine what it would

mean to refuse the sustained antagonism towards blackness and the perpetual rejuvenation of anti-black worlds.

In Bopape's practice, there is an incessant gravitational pull towards the geological. This has been summoned in different ways, including the cascading of water in *Untitled (Of Occult Instability) Feelings* (2018), the inclusion of soil from different parts of the world in *Azania* (2016), the motioning towards rain in *Sedibeng (it comes with the rain)* (2017), and the representation of the sky and the cosmos in *is i am sky* (2013). In *kgoro ya go tšwa: even if you fall from a circle* (2013), Bopape gestures towards geological exits and entrances – such as the Gate of the Sun in Bolivia – presumably as gateways between multiple worlds and multiple modes of being. What has become central to Bopape's current practice is the arrangement of different materials into shrines that commemorate different Afro-diasporic events and experiences. In these immersive arrangements, Bopape compels us to pay attention to the physical components that make the whole, as well as the moments in between the installations that are read and discussed as voids and nothingness. It is through these moments of lack and absences that the concerns of this chapter are conjured. I therefore contemplate the intersections between blackness, nothingness and the idea of representing absences. The materiality and physicality of Bopape's shrines is deliberate. It is intended to be immersive and create a visual and experiential environment where an amalgamation of postcolonial sensibilities are potentiated and expressed. However, it is Bopape's earlier use of the seemingly non-material, ephemeral, and technological expression of the same issues that is of particular interest to me. It is in earlier works, such as the 2013 video piece, *is i am sky* that some of these pertinent questions of ownership and lack thereof originate. It is thus with this in mind that I want to pay attention to Bopape's earlier non-material exploration of the materiality of land and landlessness.

In 2011, during a residency at the Headlands Centre for the Arts in San Francisco, Bopape received news from her native South Africa about an ongoing court case against then African National Congress Youth League President, Julius Malema. Malema had sung a contentious struggle song, “Ayasaba Amagwala/ dubuli bhunu” (The cowards are scared/ Kill the Boer/white farmer), which was composed and sung by Peter Mokaba at the funeral of assassinated uMkhonto we Sizwe member Chris Hani in 1993. Bearing in mind the importance of song in the struggle towards the emancipation of black South Africans during the apartheid era, the banning and criminalisation of the song seemed reminiscent of apartheid-like policing of black people’s experiences, as well as their access to and expression of memory. Bopape set out into the landscape of San Francisco, and began contemplating the judicial and institutional erasure of the memory of black people and the continued struggle to make black people’s experiences invisible. She began singing another struggle song, *Hamba Kahle Mkhonto* (Go well Spear of the Nation), which was ordinarily sung at the funeral of those who died at the hands of the apartheid police and government.

Bopape’s singing of *Hamba Kahle Mkhonto*, while barely audible, intermingled with the sound of drums, the wind, and the sea, ushers in *is i am sky*. The superimposition of the sounds, synchronous with the superimposition of the artist’s face and the landscape whence she walks, immediately draw us into a world between two worlds; worlds continually folded within one another ad infinitum. We see a face – shot from below and reminiscent of the socialist realist trope of monumentalisation – that flows between transparency and concreteness. It flows between our expectations of a human face as it would appear to us in nature and a translucent face that challenges our perception of the realness of that nature. The first imagery we see is that of a clear blue sky with birds flying across. This is soon

interrupted by what can best be described as a spillage of the colour black, across the clear blue sky, or across the surface of the video – perhaps across both. The spillage is the beginning of a continuous abstraction of the images we are presented with throughout the video. The artist's semi-transparent smiling face takes over the picture plane. The transparency makes it possible for us to see the sky through the face. Other shots of the artist's face, recorded at a different time, are also visible through the transparent face, rendering the border of the face a gateway into multiple places, multiple temporalities, and multiple modes of being. Throughout the video, there is a kind of schizophrenic merging of the face, the sky and the landscape whence the artist is walking. The sky takes on the shape and characteristic of the landscape, and the landscape takes on the characteristic of the face. Throughout all of this, with the accompaniment of the drums and the sound of the wind, the artist continues to sing to the land, to the sky and to the cosmos.

A rupture occurs halfway through the video, indicated by a sudden carousel of flashing colours and shapes, accompanied by a change from the drum riff to a piano solo that marshals in an eerie, otherworldly and cosmic mood. We slowly depart from the world of the artist's face, the landscape and the sky into a world of a *sea* of stars, of the sun, and of the cosmos. This world is represented by a sea of cascading, seizure inducing arbitrariness and abstraction. The colour black, which fights to form the base of this cosmic representation, is continually encroached upon by a vast array of primary colours insistently flashing across the picture plane. Chaos and confusion are invoked through the non-representational overstimulation of mere shapes and colours. This disorientating feeling is endless, as more shapes, more colours, and more eerie noises attack the senses for a necessarily unnecessary long period of time. We hear the sound of what could be a bird – the sound is familiar, yet it has been rendered unfamiliar in and through the distortion of the soundtrack. It instead

sounds like an otherworldly creature that is attempting entry into this world through the gateway facilitated and potentiated by the artist's transparent face. A sea of kaleidoscopic colours fights against the encroaching black colour as a copulation of the imagery of the artist's face, the land and the sky stretches across the entirety of the video: "I was trying to find a way of marrying the sky", says the artist. "I was wondering what shape the ceremony would take".²³¹ The ceremony takes the shape of an amalgamation of abstract forms and distorted sound, of the colour black and of absence and nothingness that are realised through the deliberate (over)use of video and sound mixers.

It is useful to consider Bopape's practice through the relationship between race and technology, and race as technology. This deliberate overuse of videographic and sonic editing systems help construct an alternate existence where the memories of black people are made visible and are allowed to be safely unpacked. It is with this in mind that the chapter looks at the intersections of the supposedly adversarial relationship between blackness and technology. It draws on Bopape's work to contemplate the use of technology as generative and able to (re)produce positive black worlds. This argument will begin with a contextualisation of South African struggle/freedom songs, which were sung from the advent of European colonialism, throughout the apartheid era, and which continue to form the backdrop to contemporary struggles in South Africa to this day. The chapter will argue that Bopape's singing of *Hamba Kahle Mkhonto* (a struggle song) is a means/method of technological reproduction. Through the singing of the song, parallels will be drawn between Bopape's generative actions and calling on the history and memory of struggle songs as a way of imagining and singing 'a different' world into existence where black people are free from the daily struggles and violence they encounter.

²³¹ Bopape, personal communication, 2018.

At the centre of this exploration into race, nothingness and the materialisation of something, I will lean in on the relationship between race and technology as outlined in the work of Louis Chude-Sokei and Alexander Weheliye.²³² I will further explore the relationship between race and technology through Bopape’s use of videographic imagery and digital manipulation strategies – such as (over or under)saturation, superimposition, rendering, masking and unmasking, layering, and blending – in the (de)construction of anti-blackness and a move towards creating an alternate world for blackness to exist. The aesthetics of blackness and nothingness and the quest to find a visual and sonic language with which to represent nothingness is at the centre of Bopape’s practice. This brings together the concern in the video that are linked with race, technology and nothingness and how the technological and nothingness communicate with each other through the video. Following the contextualisation of struggle songs, as a point of departure in the video, the chapter will move through the technological (and its relationship to the sonic and to the body), and finally move to the issue of nothingness. The issue of blackness and nothingness are the object of the study in the last section of the chapter. I will explore this articulation of an aesthetic of blackness and nothingness through Calvin Warren’s notion of “ontological terror” and the nothingness of blackness as a “terrifying formlessness”, as well as the ontology of blackness as nothingness as it appears in the work of David Marriott.²³³ The chapter concludes with a reflection on Bopape’s interest in treating the colour black as a subject of inquiry, and her insistent intrigue in what it would mean to represent the colour black and what form this representation would take.

²³² Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*; Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

²³³ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*; Marriott, “Whither Fanon?”; Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”

Struggle Songs: Song as Black Battle Cry

In 2011, South African politician Julius Malema was found guilty of hate speech for singing the struggle song that includes the lyric, “Kill the farmer, kill the boer”.²³⁴ Pieter Mulder, then Freedom Front Plus party leader and Deputy Agriculture Minister of South Africa advocated for the legal punishment of Malema. He stated that “[t]here’s no way in which you can dismiss the song as something that simply has to be viewed in a political context and that doesn’t have any real consequences”.²³⁵ The Afrikanerbond, an Afrikaner nationalist society (formerly the secret society the Afrikaner Broederbond, or the Afrikaans Brothers Group), released a statement to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) that shifted the conversation to issues of human rights. The statement notes:

We trust that the Human Rights Commission will act in a manner which will restore our faith in this institution, as well as in the promotion of human rights.²³⁶

It should be understood that the institution that the Afrikaner Broederdom wishes to uphold is the past, apartheid, anti-black, racist institution that created the conditions that Malema is pushing against. It should also be accepted that the rights that are called for are white people’s rights, since black people are always already excluded from the construct of political and social humanity. There is thus a nostalgia for an anti-black kind of governance. Ironically, Malema is singing songs borne out of a time of extreme violence against black people and excavating the language of resisting those conditions and using it in a time when the violence is more covert. By using the song, he in fact gestures towards the fact that little has changed, that supposed political and social emancipation has done little to eradicate the violent daily lived experiences of black people: black people remain landless, they remain

²³⁴ “Juju Strikes Again: 7 of Malema’s Most Disturbing Comments.”

²³⁵ Pieter Mulder in “Malema Charged over ‘Kill the Boer.’”

²³⁶ Cited in “Malema Charged over ‘Kill the Boer.’”

outside the realm of civil society and formal politics, and they are still fighting a social and political fight where death is always possible and imminent. The irony lies in the fact that the resistance to Malema's use of struggle songs is a nostalgia for the exact period that Malema is borrowing from. The subtext of the Afrikanerbond, as well as Mulder's statements are, however, rooted in a nostalgia and a desire to go back to the conditions that created and maintained anti-black worlds.

During the court case, "[t]he ANC strongly resisted this burial of song, arguing that it was part of a vibrant tradition of oral history".²³⁷ The song was defended by many ANC members as part of "history and heritage" and should thus be allowed to continue existing in post-apartheid South Africa.²³⁸ Its elimination from national consciousness was therefore presented as an erasure of an integral part of the history of black people. AfriForum, an organisation that promotes the interest of the Afrikaans in South Africa, stated that they were not advocating the complete erasure of the song from all contexts, but argued that they understood how the song could be sung "in a proper context"²³⁹. Scholar Retha Langa goes on to argue that, by wanting the song to remain within the confines of history books, school plays and the museum (as AfriForum argued), it would be outside of the reach of quotidian performativity and "[t]here would then be no need for the unruly presence of 'Dubula ibhunu' outside the safety of the museums".²⁴⁰

Khondlo Mtshali and Gugu Hlongwane draw attention to two freedom songs – *Nkosi Sikelela i-Afrika* (1897) and *Nans'indod'emnyama Verwoerd* (c. 1950s), composed by Enoch

²³⁷ Langa, "A 'Counter-Monument' to the Liberation Struggle: The Deployment of Struggle Songs in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 223.

²³⁸ Langa, 223.

²³⁹ AfriForum's Martin Bassey cited in Langa, 223.

²⁴⁰ Langa, 223.

Sontonga and Vuyisile Mini²⁴¹ respectively²⁴². *Nkosi sikelela i-Afrika*, (God Bless Africa), was originally composed as a Christian hymn. It's lyrics are those of pleading with God to come save and protect the nation and to "stop the war and suffering" of black people. The song, which was later adopted as a protest song and an unofficial anthem for black South Africa, was responding to the centuries of racial oppression at the hands of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonialism. It was responding to and pushing against the conditions that helped create the anti-black world that black people were expected to live in through dehumanising policies, including the 1913 Native Land Act that displaced a large number of black South Africans. By the 1950s, soon after the apartheid regime was implemented by then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in 1948, the nature of the protest/struggle/freedom songs had altered completely. Mini's *Nans'indon'emnyama Verwoerd* is a warning against Verwoerd and his anti-black government. The lyrics, which translate into "Here comes the black man Verwoerd. Watch out for the black man Verwoerd", are no longer of pleading with a higher power to come and save the black race. Instead, the black 'man' is acknowledged to have the ability to overthrow the oppressive government. By the time the then African National Congress Youth Leader Peter Mokaba sang the song "Ayasaba Amagwala, dubuli bhunu" in 1993, the lyrics had morphed into a militant radical call for the killing of white Afrikaners (white farmers) and consequently, a call to use all necessary force against the oppressive apartheid system.²⁴³ Different later variations and adaptations of the song's lyrics exist. In some instances, a young person asks permission from her or his mother to leave the home, to go out in the streets and to become a soldier against the system. At other times, the lyrics

²⁴¹ Mini is said to have sung this song on his way to being executed by the apartheid government in 1964; Langa, 219.

²⁴² Hlongwane and Mtshali, "Contextualizing South Africa's Freedom Songs: A Critical Appropriation of Lee Hirsch's Amandla!: A Revolution in Four Part Harmony."

²⁴³ This chronological separation of the intensity of the radicality of the songs, while it may apply to a large number of songs, is not absolute. Other 'less intense' songs were still being composed and performed in the 1970s and 80s, as indicated by Mtshali and Hlongwane (524). Furthermore, there were different black political organisations, some believing in the continuation of peaceful protest, while others advocated the use of military force against the apartheid regime. As such, these different political parties (and populist groups or the general public), would have sang different kinds of songs at different times.

speak of the many black people who have been killed by and through the system, and thus calls for a radical reciprocation of the same.

As Mtshali and Hlongwane indicate, struggle songs can be divided into different periods: the period of the more peaceful protest of late nineteenth century, the more radical and forceful songs following the implementation of apartheid in 1948, and the militant protest songs of the 1970s to the early 1990s.²⁴⁴ This transition of the ‘forceful’ nature of the songs coincides with the resistant approach of black South Africans – from the peaceful protests from the nineteenth century, to the radical change towards armed resistance following the killing of peaceful protestors during the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, and the era of South Africa’s State of Emergency in the mid 1980s. What is interesting in this account of the use of struggle songs in contemporary South Africa is that the more tame and ‘peaceful’ *Nkosi Sikelela i-Afrika* has been absorbed into the South African National Anthem. It constitutes the first two opening verses, and is ironically succeeded by the apartheid government’s anthem, *Die Stem* (The Voice). The more militant and radical call for the end of the apartheid regime, and the call to remove the perpetrators of anti-blackness, are criminalised. Hence the banning of singing the song by the Supreme Court in 2011 and its classification as hate speech.

Struggle songs were an integral part of South Africa’s quest for freedom. They were instrumental in “the making of a collective identity from liberation songs” and were indicative of “the power of music to communicate, heal and liberate”.²⁴⁵ They created different levels of consciousness about the struggle against the colonial and later, apartheid government.²⁴⁶ They also helped unite people with different ideologies and helped mobilise a

²⁴⁴ Hlongwane and Mtshali, “Contextualizing South Africa’s Freedom Songs: A Critical Appropriation of Lee Hirsch’s *Amandla!*: A Revolution in Four Part Harmony,” 516.

²⁴⁵ Hlongwane and Mtshali, 524; 525.

²⁴⁶ Shirli Gilbert cited in Langa, “A ‘Counter-Monument’ to the Liberation Struggle: The Deployment of Struggle Songs in

collective body against a common enemy. They therefore provided useful tools with which to communicate the grievance that black people had with their living conditions. Referring to the work of Belinda Bozzoli, Hlongwane and Mtshali note how struggle songs were often performed at public gatherings that were either already politicised, or were politicised through the singing of the struggle songs. There is a point to the “theatrical form taken by these events; the implication being that these events were primarily scripted, staged and performed” by people in positions of power, and in those instances where different political groups had come together, by the more dominant group.²⁴⁷ Retha Langa further states that the liberation songs that

were composed as part of the resistance against apartheid, including in the military camps of the liberation movement’s armed wings, have continued to play a visceral role in South Africa’s political landscape after the turn to democracy in 1994. Struggle songs are deployed – at times with new lyrics and gestures – in contemporary performance contexts which produce multiple meaning. They are used by black people to mobilise and show support for their preferred political candidates and to attack their opponents in succession battles and by politicians in attempts to unite voters behind their leadership.²⁴⁸

The continued singing of the songs, in a contemporary era, is an indication of the continued need for fighting and for resisting against something, even though the supposed enemy has been ‘defeated’. Malema’s singing of *Dubula ibhunu* brings into question the erasure of memory and the erasure of certain aspects of the liberation struggle. The decision by the courts to, again, ‘ban’ the singing or utterance of the song is a continued policing of black people’s experiences. In effect, the system is yet again dictating to black people how they should feel and react towards the current state of the nation.

Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 216.

²⁴⁷ Hlongwane and Mtshali, “Contextualizing South Africa’s Freedom Songs: A Critical Appropriation of Lee Hirsch’s *Amandla!*: A Revolution in Four Part Harmony,” 325.

²⁴⁸ Langa, “A ‘Counter-Monument’ to the Liberation Struggle: The Deployment of Struggle Songs in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 216.

Videographic and Sonic Corruptions: A Journey into Abstraction

Bopape illustrates the generative nature of song and of maintaining the legacy and practice of struggle songs. Upon hearing the news of Malema's court case, her initial recourse to dealing with the issue and the violence enacted on the memories of black people, is to revert to song as a contemplative and restitutive process. Thus, it is important to think through Bopape's reaction of the news of Malema's verdict of walking in the land and singing Hamba Kahle Mkhonto through the notion of singing a place and desired world into existence. This desire to sing something else into the world is predicated on the fact that post-colonial cultures and communities have struggled to account for what Kathryn Yusoff calls "the inheritance of violent dispossession of indigenous land".²⁴⁹ The post-colonial moment has not found ways of restitively either giving back the land, nor has 'it' communicated adequately about what to do with those that have been dispossessed.²⁵⁰ The result is that black people are stuck in a cyclical process of an "ongoing praxis of displacement".²⁵¹ This singing a world into existence is best thought through the relationship between blackness, technology as well as blackness and technology. Blackness appears in *is i am sky* through Bopape's rationale to contemplate the treatment of the memories of black people and its erasure. Blackness, therefore, appears through song and sound as they become representative not only of how black people live in precarity, but also of the means they employ to deal with and to resist against that precarity. The technological appears through the impulse to use the data-based medium of video to explore these issues. Bopape's use of the medium of video allows her to play around with temporalities, with slowing down time, stretching it out, and then suddenly speeding it up. This is achieved through not only through capturing the events on the video during the artist's filming process, but also in postproduction. Bopape relies heavily on the

²⁴⁹ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 2.

²⁵⁰ Yusoff, 2.

²⁵¹ Yusoff, 2.

technological process of postproduction, where she merges different images together that should customarily be separate, into one entity. This appears prominently through the hollowed out artist's face that becomes a frame through which various events occur. Through postproduction, sounds that 'appear' as out of place are heard at various moments, and visuals that are confusing due to their removal from reality abound. Bopape relies on the technology of the video and the sound mixers to create the world of *is i am sky* (as well as the world beyond that video that is merely alluded to or created by the viewer). In addition to blackness and technology as two potential separate entities, something else is at stake in *is i am sky*, and that is the theory of blackness and technology and blackness as technology. The notions of blackness and/as technology appears prominently in the work of Louis Chude-Sokei, who maps out the history of race and technology and makes an argument of how the two are always already closely linked.²⁵²

Firstly, I want to turn to Bopape's singing to the land and singing the land into existence and think it through the notion of Strother Purdy's technopoetics, which Louis Chude-Sokei later extends to black technopoetics.²⁵³ Purdy describes technopoetics to theorise "how our thought in inventing, designing, modifying, and using machines carries over into acts we do not consciously associate with them – like writing or reading".²⁵⁴ Technopoetics is therefore the consciously unseen, unheard or unfelt relationship that we have with technology and technological devices. Furthermore, we might consider technopoetics as that which highlights the technological components of things that we might otherwise not even consider to be technological. In this instance, Alexander Weheliye's conception of the black body as itself a kind of technology, falls within the purview of technopoetics, or considering its racial aspect,

²⁵² Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*.

²⁵³ Purdy, "Technopoetics: Seeing What Literature Has to Do with the Machine"; Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*.

²⁵⁴ Purdy, "Technopoetics: Seeing What Literature Has to Do with the Machine," 130.

black technopoetics.²⁵⁵ While Purdy might seem a redundant theorist to visit as Chude-Sokei builds on most of his primary thoughts on the nature and characteristic of technology, it is still useful to visit some of this initial thinking in reading Bopape's *is i am sky* through notions of the invisibility of the technological machine, as well as its quotidian forms of perpetual disappearance.

In "New Notes on Creolization and Technopoetics", Chude-Sokei signals to technology as a way of conceptualising "the relationship between colonial or slave-owning whites and their subhumanized and objectified others in the context of an imminent freedom".²⁵⁶ He pays attention to texts where machines "operate as a metonym for blacks, just as during slavery blacks were metonyms for labor, technology, and ...all that occupies the liminal space among primary conceptual categories such as human, animal, and machine".²⁵⁷ He analyses blackness as that which has been given the status of technology or the machine, that which is or is like machines and through this machinisation – that is, the process of being relegated a status of machine – blackness is removed from the status of the human.²⁵⁸ Blackness becomes an inanimate object that is othered and simply follows the instruction of its owner, its master, or settler-colonialists. His thesis is predicated on the belief that "technology has always been racialized or been articulated in relationship to race".²⁵⁹ In this articulation of blackness and technology, Chude-Sokei maintains that blackness as technology has been a means to produce a "crucial other" for whiteness, "another soulless 'thing' that was hardly inert and was also a source of cultural transformation and moral and social anxiety".²⁶⁰ Additionally, and paradoxically, while race and technology are always intertwined for blackness, blackness is seen to have a strained relationship with technology. Chude-Sokei refutes this "all-too-easy

²⁵⁵ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

²⁵⁶ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 128.

²⁵⁷ Chude-Sokei, 129.

²⁵⁸ Chude-Sokei, 129.

²⁵⁹ Chude-Sokei, 2.

²⁶⁰ Chude-Sokei, 128.

assumption that ... blacks are either in an adversarial relationship to technology or fundamentally opposed to it due to lack of access or differential conceptual and political priorities”.²⁶¹ In these narratives, the ”relationships between blacks and technology are structured as colonial oppositions between whites and machines”.²⁶² He maintains the belief in this close relationship between blackness and technology, and in fact argues that there is no technology without blackness. The predication on some of the language of technology on racial classifications is testament to this, and issues such as cyberpunk and Donna Haraway’s cyborg feminism, maintains Chude-Sokei, ushered in “more conversations about race or about the racial construction of the human than ever before in or around the genre of science fiction”.²⁶³ The issue of blackness as machinery ties in with notions around the labour that black people are meant to provide in the world. For instance, the word robot, with its close link to servitude (the function of the robot is to serve its creator and its owner) is “derived from the Czech word *robot*, meaning serf, if not slave labor”.²⁶⁴ With this in mind, making a correlation between black people and machines or robots is to make a statement about black people as labourers who serve the people who created their status of blackness and are inadvertently owned by them. Herewith lies the frightening relation of blackness as technology – as with narratives of most science fiction, the machine that serves its owner has the capacity and potential to free itself from servitude, and even more frighteningly, to take over the hierarchical position of its owner. Chude- Sokei argues the same, stating that

[i]f humans could be rendered sub- or inhuman, then machines by that same logic could be rendered sentient, human, raced. If (black) humans could be bought and sold, then machines could conceivably be agents of their own evolution and liberation as well as of human (white) subjugation. The latter possibility would borrow from explicit and latent anxieties about the former, and the former would help give rise to the language on which the latter

²⁶¹ Chude-Sokei, 7.

²⁶² Chude-Sokei, 130.

²⁶³ Chude-Sokei, 129.

²⁶⁴ Chude-Sokei, 21.

would depend.²⁶⁵

It is this notion of the relationship between blackness and technology that is compelling in relation to the visual, sonic and conceptual decisions made in *is i am sky*.

There is a slight danger in reading Bopape, a black woman, through the notion of machinery. If we are to consider the fact that blackness has historically been equated to technology through the lens of slavery and forced labour, the idea that Bopape's body stands in for a technological device that has the potential to create something might be read as unsettling. However, it is useful to consider the enabling capacity of technology and blackness, where technology is not always a problem for blackness. In light of recent efforts by both Chude-Sokei and Weheliye to steer the blackness and technology conversation away from that of the digital divide – that is, “technological access ... and race as a primary source of socioeconomic and technical alienation” – the technological aspect of Bopape's body as that which sings something positive into existence is exemplary of the non-adversarial component of blackness and technology.²⁶⁶ Such a reading contributes to the conversation where blackness is not seen as oppositional to technology. The use of technology to undo past racial circumscription is contentious if blackness is read as oppositional to technology. Bearing in mind Audre Lorde's thesis that “The Master's tools can never dismantle the Master's house”, the technology, if read as other to blackness, should and cannot be a tool that assists in disrupting the structure of racial domination.²⁶⁷ However, as recent studies from Weheliye and Chude-Sokei about the nature of race *and* technology have indicated, technology and blackness are very closely linked and were never mutually exclusive.²⁶⁸ With that in mind, using technological tools and advancement to eradicate racially based injustices is not a

²⁶⁵ Chude-Sokei, 129.

²⁶⁶ Chude-Sokei, 6.

²⁶⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

²⁶⁸ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*; Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*.

borrowing of the master's tools, but rather a reclaiming of the tools that blackness helped create in order to free blackness from the clutches of anti-blackness.

What is compelling about Bopape's use of technology is the deliberate manner in which she uses it, arguably, incorrectly. Instead of following the rules of what a purely good video work should look like, with perfect visuals and perfect sound, she opts instead to use that very technology to present impure visuals and impure sounds, which shall be referred to as corrupted visuals and sounds. In so doing, Bopape channels Purdy as she aims to foreground the very devices that create the video, thus making the technological the means of study as well as the object of study itself. Furthermore, Bopape makes a point of making visible the making invisible of technology that Purdy argues against. If Bopape were to use technology seamlessly in an effort to foreground technology, we might in fact not notice what she is trying to achieve. As such, she chooses rather to agitate what should be seamless in traditional systems of technological actions, and in so doing, draws attention to it through notions of disruption of form. These non-seamless, jarred occurrences in the video – in the form of synthesised images and distorted sounds – present as kinds of visual and sonic corruptions, as glitches and mistakes that should be rectified, but, in the alternate world of *is i am sky* will, and should never be rectified.

By concentrating on the glitches and corruptions, Bopape brings to light the Fanonian notion of being in relation to blackness, that blackness is “defect”.²⁶⁹ Blackness is not included in what is considered to be the proper and pure way of being – it is considered to occupy existence outside the realm of the human, where this realm takes on different forms, such as nothing, pagan, backward, or in this instance, machine. Thusly, blackness is considered to be

²⁶⁹ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 36.

a defect of ontology, something that is not quite human, but exists on its periphery, in close enough proximity not to completely frighten those that are fully inside the human but never quite ‘right’. Bopape leans in on this notion of defect through the defect of technology. However, she presents this defect as something generative, suggesting that it could open up new possibilities and worlds. The technological defect or corruption that is presented through images and sounds that are removed from reality draw attention to the problematic language that is used to discuss what is in fact considered as corruption and what is not. David Marriott argues that this ‘being’ as defect does not necessarily open itself up to “a discourse of restitution”.²⁷⁰ In the same way, Bopape presents a defect in and of itself, and not as one that requires restoration and recuperation. We might think this avoidance of recuperation in the Afro-pessimist sense, as discussed in the Framework Chapter, of refusing to restore the humanistic nature of blackness by adopting and using the tools that constructed anti-black structures in the first place. As such, Bopape leans in on the technology of defect, or lack, a space of glitches, to signal the impurity of the entire system in the first place. To drive that point forward, she insistently retains the sonic and visual defects that make up the entirety of the video.

The technological defect is presented as a process of the foregrounding of technological devices that would ordinarily be masked. It is a strategy where all components of the recording and playback process are allowed to remain in the final product, and where the notes that might have been made on how the video should be made are kept, and where the ‘mistakes’ which are in fact intentional, are also retained. These mistakes are not only retained, but are a key component of the composition of the whole video. Bopape’s ‘mistakes’ lean in on the foregrounding of the issues of blackness and technology, blackness

²⁷⁰ Marriott, 36.

and nothingness, as well as in the foregrounding of sampling, sonic corruptions, oversaturation, and blending and hybridity. Sampling, sonic corruption, oversaturation are not only the means with which a conversation about blackness and technology are potentiated. They are rather both a means of communication as well as being the communication itself. They are both carriers of meaning, as well as the content and the meaning itself. The convergence of all these components is that which creates the cosmic world of the never-ending endings, and of possibilities. In *is i am sky*, Bopape deliberately retains the visual and sonic glitches and corruptions.

The corruptions in *is i am sky* are not only sonic, but also manifest in the visual representation of the land, the sky and the cosmos. The methodical impurity or corruption in the video, in addition to being sonic and visual, are also temporal and metaphysical, and in fact, ontological, and reinforce Bopape's exploration of the relationship between blackness and technology, blackness as technology, and the generative use of technology to imagine and sing positive black worlds into existence. Bopape achieves these videographic and sonic corruptions by making innovative, unorthodox use of the video and sonic mixer. She makes use of the videographic language of sampling, masking and unmasking, as well as saturation and oversaturation, to achieve these corruptions that are prominent in the video. Sampling in the video emerges through Bopape sampling footage of the sun and other geological matters from National Geographic and later remixing and synthesising them into cosmic forms of nothingness. Bopape not only brings together technical strategies such as sampling, masking, and deconstruction of imagery – she brings them together in unorthodox, unsmooth ways, and insists on making these strategies visible in the end product. There is thus a stern foregrounding of sonic, temporal, spatial and visual disjunctures. In fact, the entire video can be seen as an amalgamation of these disjunctures.

One such technical strategy Bopape uses to foreground these disjunctures is the use of blending and hybridity. In video and film production, blending and hybridity come in many forms, sometimes through merging different images or footage together into one to create a different and alternative image that still bears traces of the initial images. Bopape accomplishes this hybridity with the face-land-sky hybrid. Bopape uses blending and hybridity as technical means to achieve an abstract cosmic realm. In *is i am sky*, the hybrid manifests through the metamorphosis of the face, the sky and the landscape that does not quite reach full metamorphosis, nor become fully hybridised. The hybridity of these different key subjects of the video instigates the confusion of form that Bopape wants us to feel. By presenting us with seemingly different materials that should be distinctive but come together, or are stuck in a loop of coming together and coming undone throughout the video, Bopape at once undermines the very make-up of the separate entities. She highlights the precarity of the conception of the body, as well as our constructed conceptions of the land and sky. Nothing is as it seems or as we imagine it to be. The use of hybridity in constructing the psychedelic world of *is i am sky* is in line with Chude-Sokei's theorising of hybridity as it relates to blackness, bodies, and technology. The conception of hybridisation and hybridity appears in Chude-Sokei as that which "engaged and depended on traditions of racial thinking to produce new ideas about the relationship between bodies and machines".²⁷¹ Chude-Sokei relates hybridity to the history of racial classifications and the abjection of mixing different races. He notes, "notions of hybridity and blending between human and machine are actually dependent on earlier ideas about miscegenation between human (white) and animal/machines (blacks)".²⁷² These conversations of miscegenation are rooted in the scientific need to classify blackness as other to whiteness, and more specifically, to claim that if whiteness is human

²⁷¹ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 129.

²⁷² Chude-Sokei, 17.

and blackness is a different species to whiteness, then blackness is outside the human. With this in mind, we might think Bopape's hybridisation as a quest to undermine these racially motivated classifications that operate on the axis of difference to claim superiority and inferiority. Put differently, by trying to find a way of "marrying the sky", as Bopape has claimed she aims to do through the video, she inadvertently indicates that the rules and classifications that would dictate that she cannot in fact marry the sky are null and void.²⁷³ She instead stretches the idea of hybridity, of "blending or synthesis", of what Chude-Sokei refers to as "creolization", as a potential merging of different organic matters in order to undermine a conditioning "by absolutist notions of racial difference".²⁷⁴ Her seemingly puerile proclamation is in fact loaded as it indicates a desire to achieve a "physical blending of oppositions", of human and geographical matter.²⁷⁵ Blending and hybridity as a thing that is seen as a problem – of diluting one race, for instance – is in Bopape turned on its head to open up other possibilities of being. Bopape's generative technological embodiment is not only, to use Chude-Sokei's phrase, a "techorganic blending" of the human and the machines, or in this instance, the human and the sky.²⁷⁶ Through Bopape, we are also invited to consider the organic form of the human as a technology in itself, and not only a merging of the human and technology or the human and a geographical entity. In the end, we can theorise the hybridity of face-land-sky as the blending of race and technology, the marrying of two seemingly separate entities, that is depended on and potentiated by the sound of the struggle song or the songline.²⁷⁷

We can see *is i am sky* as paying attention to the technological aspect of black music and song, and following on from Chude-Sokei's strategy, not simply dwelling on the

²⁷³ Bopape, personal communication, 2019.

²⁷⁴ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 131; 133.

²⁷⁵ Chude-Sokei, 133.

²⁷⁶ Chude-Sokei, 17.

²⁷⁷ Chude-Sokei, 30.

“performative, expressive, rhythmic, lyrical, or just musical” aspect of the performing of struggle songs.²⁷⁸ We should instead see the technological generative capacity of song as that which has the potential to create something subversive for blackness. As such, song in this instance becomes a means with which Bopape “directly engage[s] information and technology through sound”.²⁷⁹ Bopape uses the natality of song as a technology used to channel material and conceptual worlds into existence. In so doing, she does not presuppose a *tabula rasa* prior to the singing, but acknowledges that *something* that is already politicised and concretised, in other words, always already there. Song as natality and song as part of an origin story for positive blackness therefore does not occur on a clean slate, but is forced to exist atop already existing violences brought about by anti-blackness. In this regard, Bopape calls on all the tools at hand, including using her own body as the technology that sings these new worlds into existence. Bopape is a technology that sings a particular song that births a particular world into existence and in the process reimagining the creation myth of there being nothing and then something, but rather arguing that there was something, and then something else. Bopape invites us to imagine what these something(s) might be.

The idea of song and sound as a means of creating the land has its roots in the generative and revolutionary capacity of struggle songs. This creative myth that is rooted in song has slight parallels to ancient Australian Aboriginal practices of traversing the land and singing songs to the rhythms and contours of the landscape.²⁸⁰ While this notion of the aboriginal songlines might seem out of place in a discussion about blackness and the violence against it in Southern Africa, a reference to it is in fact in line with Bopape’s interest in cultural practices and rituals that are seen to pay attention to the land and to spiritual practices as strategies for imagining new worlds into being. Ray P. Norris and Bill Yidumduma Harney describe

²⁷⁸ Chude-Sokei, 5.

²⁷⁹ Chude-Sokei, 5.

²⁸⁰ Harney, “Songlines and Navigation in Wardaman and Other Australian Aboriginal Cultures.”

songlines as “oral maps of the landscape, enabling the transmission of oral navigational skills in cultures that do not have a written language. In many cases, songlines on the earth are mirrored by songlines in the sky, enabling the sky to be used as a navigational tool, both by using it as a compass, and by using it as a mnemonic”.²⁸¹ Singing ‘Hamba Kahle Mkhonto’ to the land can thus be read as a call to ancient scientific, astronomical and mythological means of imagining, dreaming and creating a landscape. Bill Gammage describes the Aboriginal songlines as the “path or corridor along which a creator ancestor moved to bring country into being”.²⁸² With this in mind, I want to think about and position Bopape’s singing to the land and the sky as a reproductive means of singing a non-violent black world into being. I see Bopape’s actions in *is i am sky* as a call to ancient scientific, astronomical and mythological means of imagining and dreaming a landscapes into existence. Since the imagining occurring in *is i am sky* does not do so on a *tabula rasa*, but rather on a slate marked with the memory of injustices towards black subjects, it extends its terranean imagining and becomes both a land-based as well as sky-based songline. Songlines, derived from a term coined by Bruce Chatwin in 1987 to describe an ancient Australian Aboriginal practice sometimes referred to as “Dreaming Tracks”, is married with struggle songs and open up a pathway for Bopape to walk in search of a discovery of something new.²⁸³

In *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, Chude-Sokei signals to “the awareness that black music – from jazz to reggae, hip-hop to electronic dance music – has always been the primary space of direct black interaction with technology and informatics”²⁸⁴. In *is i am sky*, Bopape mobilises struggle songs, a form of “black sound as a

²⁸¹ Harney, 1.

²⁸² Cited in Harney, 6.

²⁸³ Chatwin, *The Songlines*; Harney, “Songlines and Navigation in Wardaman and Other Australian Aboriginal Cultures,” 6.

²⁸⁴ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 5.

site of technological engagement”.²⁸⁵ The technology inherent in the practice of singing a place into being is facilitated and potentiated through the body of the artist. Bopape herself becomes a technology that sings a generative black world into existence. The idea of singing a place into existence places the active aspect of song – song as a medium with which to conjure something into existence – or using song for something to materialise. As such, the use of struggle songs becomes a call for materiality, or as a call towards humanity, towards presence, towards ownership (of one’s own life, and of one’s own way of living). The chapter reads Bopape as practising a “black technological agency”, to borrow from Chude-Sokei, by singing a positive black world into existence as a means to bring to the fore what Langa calls “commemorative practices” and I refer to as commemorative practices of blackness.²⁸⁶

These commemorative practices of blackness though sound appear prominently through intentional sonic and visual corruptions throughout the video. Most alluringly are the sonic corruptions that interface with the corrupted hybridised visuals. The sound of the wind that would normally be edited out in post-production is recorded with the intention of being included as a prominent soundtrack in the video. In the video, there is a purposeful overreliance on editing technologies to create this cosmic, alternate universe. It is thus interesting to consider sound in Bopape’s work, not as an accompaniment of the very deliberately disorientating, psychedelic, schizophrenic, and potentially seizure inducing visuals. Instead, the sound functions alongside the use of the visuals to create a much more sensorial experience of the work. What viewers see and hear in the use of sound and visuals in *is i am sky* is a slight corruption of reality and what pristine, well-documented and well-edited video would look like. We are instead presented with impurities of our reality as a way of signalling to the impure nature of the experiences of blackness in an anti-black world.

²⁸⁵ Chude-Sokei, 6.

²⁸⁶ Chude-Sokei, 19; Langa, “A ‘Counter-Monument’ to the Liberation Struggle: The Deployment of Struggle Songs in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” 224.

Bopape has essentially corrupted the way we want to see and hear video, the way we are accustomed to seeing and hearing video. With that in mind, we should consider the deliberate use of ‘incorrect sound’ or indeed ‘bad sound’ as a potential form of resistance from normative expectations of blackness. By deliberately recording and inserting the sound of the wind in *is i am sky*, something that in a technologically good video would have been omitted from the soundtrack, Bopape essentially argues against the expectations of how black people are meant to sound (or not sound) in certain spaces. This use of the aesthetic of the sonic signals to the institutional structures that necessitated the composition of struggle songs and to help us consider why certain experiences of blackness are proposed to remain in the comfort of museums or school text books and how and why they cannot be a part of everyday black lived experiences. Bopape makes us think about the policing of sound as it relates to blackness and signals to the potentially emancipatory practices for blackness to escape capture from oppressive prescriptions and restrictions by presenting an impure, a corrupted sound track. Bopape, continuing from Chude-Sokei, ultimately uses technology to transform race, while also using race to transform technology and sound being at the centre of that transformation.²⁸⁷

Tina Campt states that, “all sound consists of more than what we hear. It is an inherently embodies modality constituted by vibrations and contact”.²⁸⁸ In *is i am sky*, beyond the vibrations and contact, what we hear is also important because what we hear does not coincide with that we should ordinarily be hearing. Campt invites us to “listen to the infrasonic frequencies of images that register through feeling rather than vision or audible sound”.²⁸⁹ In Bopape, listening to the infrasonic frequencies means paying attention to the hapticality – which manifests through a sensorial reaction to the uncomfortable images on

²⁸⁷ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 19.

²⁸⁸ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 7.

²⁸⁹ Campt, 52.

screen – as well as the visual and the audible, because the visuals and sounds are orchestrated in such a way that disrupts normative modes of seeing and listening through the notion of corruption. The issue of sonic and visual corruption and impurity is continued through temporal representation in the video. The temporality in Bopape is always already displaced. The non-chronological, purely durational structure of time in *is i am sky* is rooted in the fact that the entire video is a lengthy compositions of never-ending endings. The video does not have a beginning middle and an end. Its disorientating nature is rooted in the fact that the video appears to begin at the end, and continues to unravel as an amalgamation of multiple endings. It begins as a rupture and continues in that rupturous state *until the end*. Through this continuous unfolding of never-ending endings, Bopape invents a videographic language for futurity. It is through this strategy of presenting a constellation of psychedelic endings that Bopape compels us to rethink how we want to engage with video.

What is mostly at stake in *is i am sky* is the issue of foregrounding and backgrounding the technological components that are used to create the video. This foregrounding and backgrounding of technology can be elaborated through Purdy's notion of the disappearance of technology in everyday life. What brings Bopape's practice snugly to the discussion of race and technology is her deliberate foregrounding of the production process of the video. Strother Purdy, whose thesis of technopoetics *Chude-Sokei* builds on, and is thus worth considering in relation to the nature of machinery and technology, highlights "the illusion of machine invisibility".²⁹⁰ His thesis is predicated on the belief that machines have historically served a particular kind of service to mankind where that service is hidden from view and made invisible. Machines disappear and become less visible due to their ubiquity. As such, their ability to remain visible is made (or forced) to disappear into the background of our

²⁹⁰ Purdy, "Technopoetics: Seeing What Literature Has to Do with the Machine," 139.

consciousness and we become unaware of, in fact ignore, their existence in our everyday lives. Purdy goes on to argue that the invisibility of machines is not only predicated on familiarity and normalisation. Instead, he posits that “we make machines invisible because we fear them”, and what we ultimately fear is the possibility of their take-over of our lives.²⁹¹ It is for this reason that Chude-Sokei sees technology as that which instigates “moral and social anxiety” as discussed above.²⁹² Following on from Purdy, Chude-Sokei argues that this invisibility (rooted in the visual) is indeed a characteristic of engaging with technology. He, however, argues that while technology “had become so naturalized as to be invisible” it was “audible in the sound world of the jazz age”.²⁹³

We can begin to think Purdy’s disappearing of the machine and its invisibility through the notion of corruption and impurity of the videographic and sonic mixers. Corruption becomes the language with which to speak about the un-disappearing and making visible of the technological, that which Purdy effectively is arguing for. By foregrounding that which should be in the background – thus corrupting the accepted form of video production – the technological aspects of the video is not only a means to an end, but an end in itself. There is a motioning towards revelation, a revelation of the seams of audio and visual production. Bopape adopts the strategy by foregrounding the texture and form of these seams instead of hiding them in the background, thus potentially allowing them to disappear, despite them being there. In the same way, blackness as technology is made to disappear, and blackness is made to disappear from ontology and from the classification of the human. It is this disappearing of blackness, of the events and shapes and sounds on screen, as well as the technologies that produced the sounds and events, that Bopape ultimately fights against in this work. In Purdy, the technological device is always already disappeared. In Bopape,

²⁹¹ Purdy, 133.

²⁹² Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 128.

²⁹³ Chude-Sokei, 28.

however, we do not see a disappeared technology, but one that is in a constant state of construction and deconstruction. This is to say, the morphing of the sky into the land, and the land into the face is stuck in a cyclical process (or loop) of appearing and disappearing, until ultimately, everything is overtaken by abstraction. The abstraction is, however, not complete. It retains traces of the original objects and subjects that are in constant flux. There is an inherent horror in the idea of disappearance – in the idea that something that was there no longer is – especially when we are aware that the disappeared thing in fact still exists and can become visible at any moment. But, the disappearance in *is i am sky* is generative as it forces us to confront the technology that we would ordinarily make to disappear.

Terrifying Formlessness: Blackness and Nothingness

*Blackness is a void of nothingness.*²⁹⁴

is i am sky can be read as an exercise in the representation of blackness, nothingness as well as the nothingness of blackness. It can also be read as an experiment to invent the shape and form this representation of blackness and/as nothingness might take. Bopape begins this exercise through her initial impulse of singing to the landscape. The aim of her singing to the landscape is to imagine and to create a world that is free from the violence experienced by black people on a daily basis. The link between singing a world into existence already presupposes that there is nothing in the landscape to begin with – Bopape, in her exercise, does not have to destroy anything that already exists in order to make space for this new world. Instead, her instinct is that the landscape she walks is not necessarily unoccupied or uninhibited, but actually occupies, is occupied by and *is*, in fact, nothing. This assumption

²⁹⁴ Bopape, personal communication, 2019.

recalls colonial history, where western travellers travelled to places such as South Africa, and upon reaching there, assumed a kind of *terra nullius*, a nobody's and uninhabited land that could be possessed and taken over. There was little accounting for those who already lived there and occupied the landscapes – these occupants were indelibly allocated the status of nothing, of absence, of not being there. Bopape's assumption is however, not an act of colonialism, or conquering. It can be seen in the same light of (or heard in the same sound as) a melancholy struggle song, one that comes out of resignation and desperation. The impulse to go into the land is not one of adventure, intrigue and curiosity. Rather, it is borne out of a deep sense of necessity when Bopape realises that black people can never regain the things – land and humanity – that they had before. Bopape's impulse to sing a world into existence is thus motivated by the realisation of black South Africans *having* nothing in the form of land ownership, and the possibility of being deprived their sonic history and heritage of reflecting upon the pain and means of their struggle and forms of refusals. It is therefore from this position of lack, absence, deprivation and nothingness that Bopape's exercise begins and continues.

Bopape's exercise presents more provocations than solutions, as the landscape – or any landscape for that matter, as San Francisco, where the video was filmed, acts merely as a metaphor for black diasporic forms of undoing the displacement of black people. Bopape's walking into and on the land, and singing to the land, while seeming to summon an ecstatic outcome, is laboured and strained. This labour is an invocation of past labours and the nothingness speaks to iterations of nothingness as a foundational trope of mapping black lives as labourers. This is emphasised in the consistent refusal to concede to a normative form in the work. Despite her many attempts, she cannot imagine something new because the imagining begins from a point of somethingness of the landscape, and not the nothingness

that she would have wished for. This somethingness of the landscape seems to expel any easy access to a newly imagined or sung world. In its place, confusion and uneasiness seem to present themselves as the only possible outcome, where the singer (and generator of this newness) gets swallowed up by the thing she attempts to create. In the process, the somethingness of Bopape's black body seems to disintegrate to the nothingness that she assumed to possess the landscape and the sky. She slowly disappears and reappears into nothingness, thus becoming a part of that nothingness.

It is unclear whether this disappearance into nothingness was intended by the artist. What is clear, is the suggestion that any attempt for blackness to escape capture from the system, is constantly undermined and resisted by the very systems and the mechanisms that created it. What is also clear, is that blackness fights the system, at every turn, refusing the conditions of its subjugation as indicated by the composition and singing of struggle songs that Bopape later refers to. As Bopape's body becomes swallowed into nothingness, it contests its impending disappearance, and constantly returns, albeit in altered forms, to the surface of the video. As the video unfolds and various forms of nothingness threaten to completely suck the body in, Bopape's face survives the turmoil, confusion and disappearance until the end of the video. What survives is not the body that we saw at the beginning of the video – although this body too, was never fully real, as it was also presented as incomplete, bearing semblances of nothingness. The body in the end is completely abstracted into a melody of colours, predominantly black, read as a residue of physical body and representational tropes of and within blackness as colour and skin tone. The body has refused and contested an imposed nothingness, but its very being and its very makeup have been altered and distorted from its original state.

Blackness and nothingness or the nothingness of blackness can be said to have its roots in anti-blackness. Anti-blackness constructs and dictates how black people are meant to exist in the world. It is the ability to decide who exists inside of being and humanity and who does not. In this equation, Calvin Warren argues that blackness, through anti-black structures, does not equate being, which has material significance and substance in the world.²⁹⁵ Instead, black people merely exist in the world, thus drawing a stark contract between existence and being. Being would mean that blackness is inside humanity, while existence relegates it to a continued state of outside of humanity, while simultaneously and paradoxically existing just enough to serve and service those that are inside the human. For Warren, “black existence” is exemplary of “existence as non-being”, where there is a difference between “ontology and existence”.²⁹⁶ This is derived from Fanon, who explores how blackness is embodied in nothingness through what he calls a “zone of non-being, an extraordinary sterile and arid region”.²⁹⁷ Extending Fanon’s thesis, the idea is that just because you exist does not mean that you have ontology.²⁹⁸ Blackness, therefore, does not have material substance that would make it into something – the outcome is that blackness is relegated to the position of nothing and nothingness, and leads Marriott to recall Fanon, who “identifies in the colonial subject a void-like nothingness-of-being”.²⁹⁹ The confusion of blackness as nothingness can be found in the assertion that blackness as “nothing (absence, simulation, impersonation, irrealization) is its imaginary synthesis – and the very thing that makes it identifiable as an image of being is what fissures it and deforms it as a ghostly double of being”.³⁰⁰ The paradoxical existence of blackness that is nothing inspires what Warren calls ‘ontological terror’.³⁰¹ Ontological terror is what which is revealed when the ontological question as it relates to blackness is

²⁹⁵ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 13.

²⁹⁶ Warren, 13.

²⁹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2.

²⁹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

²⁹⁹ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 46.

³⁰⁰ Marriott, 47.

³⁰¹ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*.

probed. Asking about how blackness fits within ontology reveals the instability of those classifications, because, blackness should be seen to have ontology, but it is not. The nothingness of blackness, as ‘something’ that is ‘nothing’ and is outside the human, while still bearing traces of humanity, confuses the issue of ontology, resulting in ontological terror. Blackness, which, according to Moten “is the anoriginal disturbance of ontology”, disrupts ontology’s notions of time and space, thus producing this ontological terror.³⁰² Ontological terror is “the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism”.³⁰³ Warren further proposes a meditation:

on this (non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black being incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being – the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). Being claims function as its property (all functions rely on Being, according to this logic, for philosophical presentation), but the aim of black nihilism is to expose the unbridgeable rift between Being and function for blackness.³⁰⁴

For Warren, blackness has no being in the Afro-pessimistic manner of speaking – that blackness was created, to violent encounters, to always already be non-ontological – and it exists outside the human.³⁰⁵ Despite this, black people have a function in an anti-black world, a function that usually serves those that create and maintain anti-blackness.³⁰⁶ The nothingness of blackness is how anti-blackness is created and maintained. Warren concludes that “[t]he puzzle of blackness, then, is that it functions in an antiblack world without being.”³⁰⁷ This “without being” is that which relegates blackness to the status of nothingness. And it is this nothingness of blackness that inspires “ontological terror” and a hatred for

³⁰² Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

³⁰³ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 4.

³⁰⁴ Warren, 5–6.

³⁰⁵ Warren, 4.

³⁰⁶ Warren, 4–5.

³⁰⁷ Warren, 6.

blackness “all over the world”.³⁰⁸ Warren maintains that any act of anti-blackness “is an engagement with this nothing and the fantasy that nothing can be dominated once and for all”.³⁰⁹ Therefore, the idea of nothingness is a problem for blackness and makes blackness vulnerable to systematic violence and oppression. Nothing “is the *source* of terror, violence, and domination for blacks”.³¹⁰ In *is i am sky*, Bopape presents an abstract scene where blackness is not nothing, but blackness moves towards nothingness by moving towards what Sun Ra refers to as the “cosmic realm” through the representation of the cosmos at the end of the video.³¹¹ By moving towards nothing, Bopape successfully indicates the split between blackness and nothingness as two separate entities, thus contesting the assumption that blackness is always already nothing. The trajectory of moving towards nothingness, Bopape signals, is mediated through anti-black structures that seek to position blackness in and as a void, as outside of humanity. This trajectory is exemplified as a continuous process of construction and deconstruction, and presents as a multi-sensorial journey into terrifying abstraction, or what Warren calls “terrifying formlessness”.³¹² The formlessness that is terrifying aligns with Bopape’s attempts at finding a language with which to represent nothingness. The nothingness for Bopape takes on the form of Warren’s terrifying formlessness. What this means is that, the metamorphosis and reconfiguration of the shapes and colours on screen attack the senses, and their “terrifying formlessness”, coupled with confusing sonic registers, render the encounter with the video an uncomfortable exchange because they do not conform to normative watching and listening practices. Our gaze is made uncomfortable – we are made to look away, readjust our perception, and then look again. This discomfort alerts us further to the fact that nothingness is imposed onto blackness, often through abstract notions that are both violent and forceful. The discomfort in *is i am sky* is

³⁰⁸ Warren, 9.

³⁰⁹ Warren, 9.

³¹⁰ Warren, 9.

³¹¹ Ra, *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation. The Collected Poetry and Prose*.

³¹² Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 4–5.

intentional. It makes us think differently about the names and forms we give blackness and signals to the fact that these naming processes of blackness should never be comfortable. The discomfort is also indicative of the continued processes of refusal that blackness undergoes to shed the imposed status of nothingness. By insisting on a blackness that is forcefully moved towards nothingness, but never reaches it, Bopape argues that while nothingness has been imposed on blackness, there is a continued refusal and black people fight, at every turn, to shed this imposed status.

Bopape's interest in representing voids and absences is tied in with her aversion to the nothingness of blackness or blackness as nothingness. While she refuses the classification of blackness as nothingness, in the video, she employs a strategy of thinking and working alongside this idea of blackness as nothingness. Bopape helps us ask: if blackness is absence or nothingness, then what form and shape would that nothingness take? By seeking to find a representation of absences and voids, Bopape seeks to bring blackness into the realm of the material world. She does this, not to prove the physicality and somethingness of blackness – an exercise that Warren would find redundant – but rather to give form to nothingness as a way of thinking through the anti-black structures that created this nothingness in the first place. The working through the nothingness of blackness should not be considered a resignation to a presupposed configuration. Instead, it should be seen as a poetic combative nature as Bopape asks: if blackness is nothing, what is that nothing capable of? It is with this in mind that Bopape begins to contemplate the position of nothingness in generative ways.

One such way is through the idea of boredom that exalts the artist. Bopape posits that she was also exploring the idea of boredom through the video, stating that, “I was trying to work with boredom, to make the video long and boring. There's something that happens when you give

into the boredom”.³¹³ In the video, a conversation is made possible between boredom and nothingness through duration. The video occurs, or appears to occur, over a lengthy period of time (just under eighteen minutes), where events that could be communicated in a short space of time are slowed down and stretched out as far and as long as they could possibly be. This occurrence of events or something over an unnecessarily long period of time gives the impression or illusion of ‘nothing happening’, where the something that is happening had been rendered insignificant. Boredom occurs when time is delayed and deferred, or when certain activities are delayed or deferred, thus rendering the video tedious. Bopape speaks about the possibility of the liberatory effect of boredom, where things not happening actually potentiate something to happen. She states that things can be so liberating because they are so boring, and this “opens something up, and when that something happens, then a rupture happens”.³¹⁴ This recalls Tina Campt’s advocacy for slowing down on quotidian black life as a mode of refusal and contemplation. Campt advocates how “attending to the infra-ordinary and the quotidian reveals why the trivial, the mundane, of the banal are in fact essential to the lives of the dispossessed and the possibility of black futurity”.³¹⁵ Bopape certainly directs us to the mundane and the banal, not as a problem that needs to be solved – that is, filling the boring moments with things to do – but, as Campt states, as moments of possibility for blackness. The rupture in *is i am sky* that seems to break our comfort in the discomfort of boredom happens sonically through a change in music, and through a sound suggesting water crushing against a hard surface. This rupture does not, however, occur to undermine the boredom or as an attempt to fill the boredom – it is in fact a way of jostling the viewer out of our comfort zones and possibly opening itself up to a different form and period of boredom. This rupture, which materialises sonically, is accompanied by a temporal rupture, where the events in the video seem to pick up pace, and shapes and colours and sounds crush against

³¹³ Bopape, personal communication, 2019.

³¹⁴ Bopape, personal communication, 2019.

³¹⁵ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 9.

the surfaces of the visuals and the sound. This rupture brings about a different representations of nothingness, where it takes on a cosmic and heavenly feel, seemingly recalling and signalling towards lines from the struggle song *Senzeni Na* (What Have We Done), when the protestors chant “Sohlangana ezulwini (we will meet in heaven”. The events on earth could not be overcome, and a signalling to the heavens suggests a kind of death, and possibly the belief that freedom can only be attained in death or through not living. The heavens, here, are religious heavens. What happens, however, when we pause on these religious heavens, and imagine them through Sun Ra’s endless realm and the idea of journeying into the abstraction of the cosmos?

is i am sky was inspired in part by Sun Ra’s 1972 poem ‘The Endless Realm’, which begins:

I have nothing

Nothing!

How really is I am

Nothing is mine

How treasured rich am I

I have the treasure of nothing....

*Vast endless nothing*³¹⁶

In the poem, Sun Ra expresses his feelings of having no significant material possessions and how that, in turn, has rendered him ‘unreal’. His questions, “How really is am I”, which is enforced more as a statement by the absence of a question mark, calls into question the realness of the person who has nothing. This should, however, not be considered or read

³¹⁶ Ra, *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation. The Collected Poetry and Prose*, 147.

through the impulse and desire that people have of material possession. The nothingness that Sun Ra has and speaks about transcends invaluable material possessions. It is a nothingness that renders blackness devoid of humanity, or ownership of their own lives, and ownership of their own deaths. The nothingness that is possessed by Sun Ra is an ontological nothingness, one that strips blackness of its humanity. Sun Ra equates the nothingness that he has, with the vastness and the neverendingness of the cosmic realm.

What is also at stake in the relationship between nothingness and the video is the idea of creating something out of nothing, or to cite Marriott, the act of “creating out of a void”.³¹⁷ This creation of something out of nothing is in line with imagining a new humanity, where following a revolutionary moment, blackness can imagine its ontology anew. It is also in line with Bopape’s going into the landscape and attempting to sing a new land into being. The aim is that, since blackness is given nothing and owns nothing, how can it begin to create something out of nothing. Bopape proposes the idea of nothingness as both a critique of the lack inherent in blackness and as a generative aspects capable of escaping anti-blackness. She helps us think through the pessimistic stance of the nothingness of blackness, but makes us recall its reality that is rooted in anti-black policies such as the 1913 Land Act that dictated that black people cannot own land in South Africa, thus relegating them to a perpetual stance of lack(ing).

The representation of blackness and nothingness in Bopape coincides with the artist’s interest in the colour black. In addition to the colour black as illustrative of blackness and its daily struggles, and blackness as that which is hated, othered, oppressed and conducive to experiencing violence, Bopape spends time contemplating what it is to represent the actual

³¹⁷ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 42.

colour black and achieves this through a spillage of the colour black across the picture plane. Here, she recalls Moten's assertion that "[t]he cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, of (the color) black take place".³¹⁸ In "The Case of Blackness" Moten endeavours to read the gridded work of Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which "is all black, is all that has been absorbed in black, is the explication of a dissonant, chromatic saturation, the inhabitation of a break or border, the disruption embedded in the grid's boundaries".³¹⁹ Moten departs from a conversation organised by *Arts/Canada* and its discussion of "[b]lack as a special concept, symbol, paint quality; the social-political implications of the black; black as stasis, negation, nothingness and black as change, impermanence and potentiality".³²⁰ Through this conversation, he disputes the belief by Ad Reinhardt of "the notion of black as absolute dereliction, as absence of color and antithetical to admixture".³²¹ In turn, Bopape treats the colour black as a subject of study in the video. She contemplates its reputation as monochromatic and monotonous and, arguing against these classifications, endeavours to represent the depth and multifaceted nature of the colour black. The physicality of blackness in *is i am sky* is presented through a precarious materiality signified through the morphing and un-morphing into various shapes.

The representation of nothingness later departs from the earthly landscape as Bopape, following on from Sun Ra, migrates the conversation of nothingness to the cosmos and to the idea of there being nothing in the cosmos. In the last few minutes of the video, Bopape seems to be grappling with this representation of something (that is, nothingness) that rationally might be seen not to exist. The merging of the face, land and sky has taken on terrifying

³¹⁸ Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness."

³¹⁹ Fred Moten, 189.

³²⁰ Fred Moten, 190.

³²¹ Fred Moten, 190.

characteristic as forms begin to disintegrate and reintegrate, but never maintaining their original shape and form. The disintegration presents as an amalgamation of many different colours fighting for existence of the picture plane, but violently settles towards an encroaching blackness. The black colour threatens to take over the picture plane, but does not fully succeed as remnants of the sky, land and face, in altered states, insist on their presence. In the end, what Bopape presents is not a presentation of the colour black or a representation of nothing, but rather the battle for representation by nothingness and by blackness.

It is useful to think the encroaching blackness towards the end of the video with and against Achille Mbembe's idea of the "becoming black of the world", where the status of black people as nothing, as lack, as defect is extended to other races, where we are beginning to have "Racism without races".³²² However, following from Chude-Sokei, and the contention that blackness does not travel and should not be used as a umbrella concept for different forms of suffering in the world, Bopape fights against this passive outlook of the condition of blackness as that which is symbolic of all worldly sufferings.³²³ As such, the encroaching blackness in *is i am sky* is refused this complete take over and insists on being acknowledged with its specificities, nuances and complexities.

Conclusion

The chapter has taken Louis Chude-Sokei's notion of "black sound as a site of technological engagement" to read Dineo Seshee Bopape's *is i sky* through notions of blackness, technology and nothingness.³²⁴ Taking the history and the singing of South African anti-apartheid struggle songs as points of departure, the chapter imagined Bopape, with the

³²² Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 7.

³²³ Louis Chude-Sokei, "Introduction: Blackness as Method."

³²⁴ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 6.

assistance of the technology of the video and sonic mixers, to sing and imagine non-violent worlds where blackness come into being. Bopape ushers us to a crucial realisation of the fear, anxiety and terror that is instigated by imagining blackness through technology and its close affiliation to nothingness. The chapter has shown the nature of thinking blackness through technology in a generative way, one that does not see blackness as having an adversarial relationship to technology. The idea of blackness as being other to technology is part of the paradoxes that follow problematic classifications of blackness in a quest to other it from the realm of the human. As Chude-Sokei has indicated, blackness has been equated to technology and to machinery through its relationship with whiteness – relegating blackness the status of machinery, black people are able to be used and to function as laboroures for the systems and structures that created it. Interestingly, however, relegating blackness to the status of technology incited anxiety in its creators, what Chude-Sokei calls “moral and social anxiety”.³²⁵ In a science-fiction tradition, Strother Purdy indicates that this fear of the technological other is motivated in part by the idea that the machine might in fact become animated and take over the role of those that created and control it.³²⁶ This fear and anxiety appears later through the classification of blackness as nothingness as that which inspires “ontological terror”, as Warren surmises, again because of the confusing and paradoxical nature of these classifications.³²⁷ Blackness as nothingness means that it should not exist and should not have material substance because of its classification as nothingness. However, blackness exists, albeit without ontology, but it exists nonetheless.

This existence of blackness, even though outside the realm of humanity, unsettles our understanding of the classification of ontology, and this unsettling and disruptive nature of the paradox of blackness as ‘something’ that is simultaneously ‘nothing’ is where Warren’s

³²⁵ Chude-Sokei, 128.

³²⁶ Purdy, “Technopoetics: Seeing What Literature Has to Do with the Machine,” 133.

³²⁷ Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, 4.

ontological terror lies. Bopape skilfully unpacks these issues, firstly by making use of technology to unsettle the way we believe we should engage with the technological and the limited way we have come to understand its being and function in the world. By using what I have called visually and sonically corrupt and impure strategies, Bopape makes visible the technological that both Purdy and Chude-Sokei have argued is made to disappear or pushed to the background.³²⁸ Bopape highlights the fact that she has made use of technology in the video by providing us with sound that is sometimes difficult to listen to, and visuals that are near impossible to watch. The marrying of the two – the un-listenable sounds and the un-seeable visuals – produce a disorientating feeling that is meant to highlight the invisibility of the technological in every day life. Furthermore, if, following from Chude-Sokei, we should imagine blackness as technology, then Bopape’s strategy of foregrounding the technological can be seen as foregrounding blackness which has been made to be invisible.

In a similar vein, the chapter has shown how Bopape grapples with the classification of blackness and nothingness, or blackness as nothingness, by deliberately contemplating what shape and form nothingness would take. Despite representing the “terrifying formlessness” of blackness through psychedelic, fast, and sometimes slow colours and shapes, Bopape motions towards the fact that these classifications should not be taken at face value, and that there is complexity to their construction and their deconstruction. The chapter has argued that the construction and deconstruction of blackness and technology, as well as blackness and nothingness, present as continuous constructions of the artist’s body, the landscape whence she walks, the inaudible singing of the South African struggle songs, as a way of imagining alternative modes of blackness to be in the world, and alternative worlds for blackness to be.

³²⁸ Purdy, “Technopoetics: Seeing What Literature Has to Do with the Machine”; Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, 128.

Chapter 2: The Fugitive: *spin*, *Polyhedra* and Escapes Towards Futurity

Introduction

I think of the figures in my work as time travelling, fantastical, alternate selves. The landscapes they traverse are simultaneously futuristic and prehistoric. As such, Time, History, Space, Place and Self-Hood – whether actual or invented – are all significant narrative and conceptual concerns. Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, 2018

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum is a Motswana artist who has lived on numerous continents, including Asia, the United States of America, and Africa. Her work has centred on issues of identity and a constant attempt to locate her being in different contexts. In order to do this, she has often employed an alter ego, Asme, who is able to traverse multiple spaces and temporalities using doubling, mirroring, notions of parallel universes and time travel. Sunstrum's research-based practice includes examinations of scientific and mathematical theories, the process of which, due to her self-proclaimed, limited knowledge of scientific and mathematical systems, is often interpretive.³²⁹ Put differently, while Sunstrum conducts studies into the works of authors, physicists and mythologists Jules Verne, Wallace Thornhill and David Talbott, to name but a few, she relies on her own personal understanding of the readings, rather than on what they are actually about. Her interpretative research into mathematics and science become the base for her exploration of seemingly non-scientific questions, such as self-mythology, imagined African Futurisms, the power of imagination, and a concern with mapping parallels between science and ancient mythology. Furthermore, she is interested in discovering non-limiting, utopian spaces that reimagine violent worldly

³²⁹ Sunstrum, Tiwani Contemporary Talk, 2016.

existences. She asserts that, “I am interested in the idea of locating utopia within the space of imagination rather than physical space. The space of imagination opens radically vast territories of possibility. This space of imagination allows for multiple, simultaneous ‘utopianisms’”.³³⁰

Sunstrum’s artistic practice is driven by speculation. Using drawing, animation, video, performance, and until recently, painting, her speculative artworks look at race through its intersection with time, space and place. She does this through carefully considered mathematical and scientific experiments where, like cosmologists, astrologists, geologists and scientists of yesteryear, she seeks to find a formula for the creation of the universe. This (re)search is one that is not only located in science, but also in mythology, where she continually signals to African mythologies of the creation of the world. It is in this matching interest from two seemingly disparate disciplines – the scientific and the mythological – that Sunstrum positions herself as a practitioner. She has a motivated interest in the politics of the construction of landscapes – an apparently natural entity that, in the context of Africa, has been inscribed with the damaging marks of colonialism. Like a typical researcher conducting experiments, Sunstrum references other theorists, borrowing their work and using it as a site of contemplation and contention. She sometimes borrows work and disrupts or distorts it altogether. She has taken to referencing romanticist landscape artists, and recently, the studio photographs of West African photographers – such as a Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge of Nigeria – and their reclaiming of the photographic representation of black people in 1920s West Africa. She references photographic archives throughout her practice, including in her videos and animations. In the first animation she made in 2013, *spin*, Sunstrum takes a close look at Anglo-American photographer and motion artist, Eadweard Muybridge’s work as an

³³⁰ Sunstrum in Matheolane, “Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum Years for a Tangible Utopia,” np.

propellant for a discussion about motion and movement of black bodies, and mirroring and doubling as enabling tools of the articulation of blackness. A later animation, *Polyhedra* (2016), retrospectively references Sunstrum's own prior research and archive in a further exploration of the relationship between landscapes, cosmology and geology. Her work can be read in relation to existing literature, film and artworks that have a close affinity with African science fiction and African futurisms. These issues that appear in Sunstrum's work are the basis of the current chapter. The chapter takes as its starting point the experiments conducted by Sunstrum to unpack the relationship between blackness, labour and fugitivity on the African continent. The chapter will use the reading of the two videos, *spin* (2013) and *Polyhedra* (2016), to visit the ways in which black bodies have been inscribed into the African landscape and imagination primarily as labourers intended to advance a settler-colonial capitalist agenda. Furthermore, the chapter seeks to highlight the daily acts of resisting and refusing anti-black worldliness through the notion of fugitivity.

spin and *Polyhedra* are short animations – 1 minute 45 seconds, and 1 minute 35 seconds respectively. They are both non-narrativised montages of archival footage and images that have been woven together in a mesmerising manner to signal to a number of postcolonial sensibilities. *spin* largely comprises archival materials from Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies. In the soundless animation, Sunstrum uses Muybridge's animations and motion studies, *Draped Woman Emptying a Bucket* (1887) as well as works from his *Animal Locomotion*, including *Buffalo Running* (1883) and *Bird in Flight* (1887). Additionally, Sunstrum references Muybridge's seminal landscape photographs of the areas surrounding the developing industrial American west coast – including the railway lines of San Francisco in the mid 1800s – such as *Valley of the Yosemite from Union Point*. The video begins with a study of a bird in motion. It is surrounded by a black backdrop. It is also encased within the

characteristically Muybridgean grid, which is used as a measuring device for the movement of the bird in flight. The bird leaves the black picture plane and moves into a borrowed reverse image of Muybridge's photograph of the Yosemite landscape. The mirror-reverse landscape is inverted, flipped and we see a doubled semi-fictionalised image of what ordinarily exists in nature. This is followed by a brief account of another grid, and rapid illustrations of what could be the moon or the sun, insistently measured against various cosmological shapes. Then another image of a Yosemite landscape, this time the doubling effect created through its reflection in the river that lies in the image's foreground. We encounter a figure of a woman. She is crouched over a bucket, and repeatedly pours water out of her bucket into the river.³³¹ The figure is translucent, making us question whether her body is really in the landscape, or merely superimposed on it. Her body is then transported (teleported) onto an image of the cosmos, of the stars, where she begins to double, then triple, until there are seven of her repeatedly performing the same activity of emptying the bucket of its water, this time, into outer space. She disappears, unexpectedly, and an image of a buffalo in motion takes over. The video ends with the running buffalo in the cosmos, outlined with stars in the astronomical (and astrological) manner, until it fully becomes the image of a 'real' buffalo encased in a grid. In *spin*, there is a merging of Sunstrum's "own archive of personal myths and biological myths paired up with Muybridge".³³²

In *Polyhedra*, we see a further engagement with the politics and politicisation of landscape. Sunstrum draws from eighteenth century European Romanticism and presents geologically-motivated scenes that are presented within a makeshift television-like screen.³³³ These scenes include images of polyhedral shapes – that is, geometric shapes such as hexagon and the cube

³³¹ "Muybridge wanted the female models to demonstrate what he considered to be everyday activities accomplished with grace and poise, whereas the male models were intended to represent the perfect, or champion, motions of a given athletic or work-related activity". (Brown, "Racialising the Virile Body: Eadweard Muybridge's Locomotion Studies 1883-1887," 643.)

³³² Sunstrum, personal communication, 2018.

³³³ Malatjie, "Maths and Bodies: Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's 'Polyhedra,'" np.

– under which we see footage of a flowing river. A voice utters something indistinct over the image of the polyhedra and the river merging into one. This is followed by an image of old mining machinery, on whose pulley stars begin to cascade downward into the place of what could have been water or some subterranean viscous matter. In this image, which was borrowed from the Wits School of Engineering’s Kimberly Mining Archive, we begin to see Sunstrum playing with the merging and substitution of cosmological and terranean matter. Sunstrum borrows from her own archive as well, including an image of *Home is Here* (2011), an earlier performance and motion study of the artist holding an enamel bowl. The enamel bowl is historically associated with working class black people in Southern Africa. In *Polyhedra*, the enamel has been substituted with glass mosaic, and instead of jumping into it like in *Home is Here*, she holds it up for the spectator to see. We do not see her face as her whole head has been cut from the frame. We are drawn to the shimmering mirrors that should supposedly reflect our own image. Behind the figure is a constellation of stars with cosmological and inter-galactical calculations, presumably of the existence of the figure reflected in multiple dimensions. As is customary of Sunstrum’s practice, the calculations could also be of how the world works. The volcanic eruption that follows brings the video back to the landscape. The black and white volcano scene seems to erupt a black gas, along with mirror-like fragments – or perhaps diamonds – that are regurgitated from the centre of the earth into the sky.³³⁴ Leaving the American landscape of Yosemite in *spin*, in *Polyhedra* Sunstrum brings the conversation back to the Southern African landscape of her childhood. The video ends with a red landscape with lights flickering in the place of where there would have been a volcano.

³³⁴ Here Sunstrum refers to the East African Rift, the main area in the continent where volcanoes have historically occurred. This area is expected to separate into two tectonic plates, making way for a new ocean and separating Africa into two (Sunstrum, personal communication, 2018).

Taking a cue from Sunstrum's strategy of slowing down and lingering on specific imagery and moments, later stitching the different moments to make a whole comprised of impossibilities, I want to loiter on two specific moments in each animation: the grid in *spin* and the eruption of the volcano in *Polyhedra*.³³⁵ Honing in on these two moments interestingly gives us a clear picture of what Sunstrum is doing in the rest of the animations and in her practice in general. The chapter locates Sunstrum's work within the work of Eadweard Muybridge. I will concentrate on Sunstrum's critical thinking with and against Muybridge. By borrowing from his practice, she at once honours and pays homage to the work that he has done. But in subtle ways, she also critiques some of his stylistic, conceptual, mechanical and content choices. At the centre of this will be the use (and abuse) of the grid by Muybridge, which Sunstrum utilises as an entry point to speak about the representation and confinement of blackness. I want to contemplate Sunstrum's grid – which I argue is an appropriation and critique of Muybridge's grid, and can be read in relation to both the anthropometric as well as the colonial grid – as a technology for the organisation of space, time and movement of black bodies. I will argue that the terranean grid becomes an obstacle for the speculative radical imagination of spatial and temporal freedom. That is to say, the terranean grid prevents the freedom potentiated by imagining positive black African futures. Borrowing from Moten, I imagine the grid as a frame that is an “externally imposed social logic”.³³⁶ Fugitivity or fugitive movement becomes a form of resistance against the grid.

Movement and fugitivity as they relate to blackness are central to the concerns in the chapter. Following an analysis of the anthropometric grid as well as the colonial urban grid system, the first part of the chapter concentrates on *spin* and considers a glitch in the very make-up of

³³⁵ The word loiter is here used deliberately as I consider its judicial meaning and implication. Black bodies are not allowed to loiter, linger, or stand around in one place for an uncomfortable period of time. Due to their criminalisation throughout history, the very act of standing, or pausing, in one place for an extended period of time is cause for illegal suspicion/behaviour. In this instance, black people are meant to always be on the move in certain spaces. They cannot stand still. They have to move past spaces they are legally not meant to be in.

³³⁶ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

these systems as a gap that potentiates black fugitive practices. I examine the notion of fugitivity in *spin* primarily through Tina Campt's *Listening to Images* to investigate the potential *for* African futurity. Campt is read in tandem with fugitivity as it appears in Daphne Brooks and Fred Moten's writing. I will read black fugitivity in relation to blackness and labour, particularly through minework. I see the descension of black mine workers into darkness – the dark hole of the mines – as a further mark on the subterranean quality imposed upon the black body. Furthermore, I will see the forced descension – for while mining cannot immediately necessarily be classified as forced labour or slavery, the conditions that enabled it have always already been of such a nature. Black miners were forced to encounter aspects of their spiritual practices that they should not have had to encounter. Here I consider an 'unforced' descension into the centre of the earth as being synonymous only with physical death and the beginning of ancestral afterlife – in other words, in different circumstances, one would enter the belly of the earth after a physical death and not as a consequence of a violent metaphorical death. As such, this forced descension unsettles something integral to the lived experience of black Africans. The machinasation – the process of turning black people into labourers – runs parallel to the process of stripping away their spiritually-based humanity. By descending into the mines on a daily basis, the black miners are made to relive the process and the enactment of their objecthood. This process will be understood through the notion of repetition, but this time a damaging repetition of their symbolic deaths.

At the centre of Sunstrum's practice is the relationship that humans have with the three surfaces of the earth: subterranean, terranean and superterranean. With that in mind, the second section of the chapter reads Sunstrum's geological and cosmological practice in relation to Kathryn Yusoff's notion of the Black Anthropocene. I will look at the issue of black labour in Southern African mines alongside African spiritual practices that are based on

geological materials, including land, gold and diamonds. In the end, it will be the intersections between land(lessness), black labour, and (the denial of) land-based African spiritual practices that are the basis of black African fugitive practices. Bearing in mind Yusoff's assertion that "the geophysics of being has been neglected in accounts of colonial violence", through *Polyhedra*, Sunstrum will be read as bringing this neglect to the fore and illustrating colonial strategies that are tied to and realised through the geological.³³⁷ The eruption of the volcano in *Polyhedra*, which demonstrates the geological process through which diamonds occur and come to the surface of the earth, will be read in relation to black miners who have died in the mines throughout history, and who have been denied proper burials. The mines are considered as a graveyard of black lives and black subjectivity, where the descension into the mines always results in the death of either physical life or subjectivity.

Into the Darkness: Mining and Black Labour in Southern Africa

*The Mine and the afterlives of its geomorphic acts constitute the materiality of the Anthropocene and its natal moment, from the transformation of mineralogy of the earth in the extraction of gold, silver, salt, and copper to the massive transformation of ecologies in the movement of people, plants, and animals across territories, coupled with the intensive implantation of monocultures of indigo, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other 'alien' ecologies in the New World.*³³⁸

The history of colonialism in South Africa is complex. The country is understood to have been colonised by both the Dutch in the 1600s and later the British in the 1800s, but it was

³³⁷ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 11.

³³⁸ Yusoff, 6.

the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to set sail towards modern day Cape Town in the late 1400s.³³⁹ The time after the first Europeans arrived in South Africa is a contentious history of the country that has many variations: interactions between the Dutch and the Khoikhoi and San people, interactions between Dutch and black South Africans who migrated from West, East and Central Africa in what is known as the Bantu migration, interactions between the Dutch and the British, the British and the black indigenes, and conflict between the numerous tribes that form part of the black South African population. These conflicts pivoted largely around ownership of land and resources and resulted in the displacement of the majority of black South Africans through the theft of their land and a disruption of their general way of life. This also led to a dehumanising of black people through labour practices, as, according to Allen, “[w]orkers were treated like inanimate factors of production but with considerably less respect than was given to machines”.³⁴⁰ This history of conflict and dispossession spans numerous centuries and manifests in different ways, most famously the apartheid era that began in 1948 with the tenure of prime minister DF Malan. Prior to that, by the late 1800s, South Africa was divided into four areas belonging to the British and the Dutch – the Cape Colony, the Natal Colony, the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony.

The chapter is interested in what Kathryn Yusoff calls “a node of extraction of properties and personhood” that was a result of White Geological expeditions across the world.³⁴¹ In the context of South Africa, this means looking at the processes of racialised labour, both forced and coerced, that resulted from the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in the 1860s, and later, that of gold in the Witwatersrand Gold Rush two decades later.³⁴² This discovery

³³⁹ Kerr, *A Short History of Africa: From the Origins of the Human Race to the Arab Spring*, 39–40.

³⁴⁰ Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*, 8.

³⁴¹ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, xii.

³⁴² Kerr, *A Short History of Africa: From the Origins of the Human Race to the Arab Spring*, 98.

culminated in century-long battles that were centred around the extraction of resources from African land. This extraction was coupled with the displacement of black people and the destruction of their belief systems that are tied to the land from whence they were displaced. The discovery also resulted in the rupturing and disturbance of black family structures as men and women left their families in search of work in other territories through migrant labour in order to survive an increasingly capitalist system that they were largely unaccustomed to. Furthermore, what was also disrupted was the structure of communities, as community leaders would send their men to work in the mines in order to gain access to finances that would enable them to pay the taxes that were gradually being imposed by the British. Migrant labour further benefited communities and their leaders in that it became possible to gain access to resources and objects such as weapons that had been brought by Europeans for the wars and encounters related to the land.

This act of entering a labour system that is predicated on the acquisition of weapons for future warfare by black South Africans is of particular interest. Historian Victor Allen notes how, throughout the development of mining in South Africa, the black population constantly resisted entering the labour market as it did not coincide with their way of life.³⁴³ Working for finances meant nothing to the agricultural system that they were engaged in. As such, they came up with numerous ways of resisting the structures that were being imposed upon them. This culminated in numerous ways, including the King of the Zulus in the 1800s, Cetshwayo, prohibiting Zulu men from working in the mines or as any kind of labourers. This means that the black population was always aware of the racialised problematics of entering into wage labour. However, the persistence of the Dutch and the British to accumulate a black labour force in order to advance their wealth could only be resisted up to a certain point. At every

³⁴³ Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*.

turn, Dutch and British settlers would implement systems that would counter the resistance of the black community. Allen further contends that, since the arrival of European settlers to Southern Africa, the settler government “took various measures which directly or indirectly attempted to overcome the unwillingness of Africans to serve European settlers”.³⁴⁴ This was done through numerous never ending strategies. Allen continues that the settler government,

introduced and sanctioned slavery; dispossessed the indigenous people of their land, thus depriving them of their customary means of subsistence; introduced vagrancy laws so that those without an obvious means of subsistence could be arrested and forced to work for Europeans; instituted systems of passes to regulate the movement of Africans into wage employment; imposed hut or head taxes that had to be paid in cash either from farming surpluses or wage employment; and at different times approved various forms of forced labour. There was no occasion after 1652 when some Africans were not forced, either physically or economically, to work against their will for white settlers or their descendants.

As much as black people were resisting entering the wage labour system, European settlers imposed policies and systems that took away black people’s options. It was in 1834 when slaves in South Africa were emancipated that the free labour force that settlers had previously enjoyed was radically diminished. A way of creating a black labour force had to be implemented, and due to the resistance of the black population, it had to be continually reconfigured. Interestingly, prior to the 1860s, black Africans had a say in the way in which they provided labour to white mine owners.³⁴⁵ If the conditions and terms of employment were not agreeable, black workers would refuse to engage in the sale of labour. It is for this reason that white settlers tried to find other means with which to attain cheap labour, including the introduction of Indian indentured labourers in 1860.³⁴⁶ These structures of dealing with what was referred to as the ‘native problem’, that is, the problem of black people

³⁴⁴ Allen, 60.

³⁴⁵ Allen, 41.

³⁴⁶ Allen, 41.

outright resisting the exploitation and dehumanising conditions of any kind of labour practice, were an indication of how blackness was always a ‘problem’ for white supremacy, or for the dehumanising conditions imposed by white supremacy on the black community.

What is of particular interest for the purposes of this chapter are the forms of negotiations and outright resistance that black people imposed on the settler government, thus constantly refusing and fighting against the structures that would turn them, not into workers, but into labourers.³⁴⁷ Any kind of working situation that black workers got involved in, whether forced, coerced or voluntary, is seen as always already forced. Even when voluntarily entering the labour system, black labourers are always seen as being forced into a system that they do not want to enter into. Furthermore, by virtue of the fact that “black mineworkers are, above all else, wage-earners and they experience all the pressures of exploitation, instability, subordination and degradation which are implicit in being so”, the labour system in South Africa is here understood as a form of dehumanisation, and an extraction of black personhood, to use Yusoff’s term.³⁴⁸ While mining work is not the first of wage labour that black South Africans engaged in – they had been leaving their homes to work in the metropole as “porters, kitchen servants, messengers, general labourers” prior to the eruption of the mining business – mining work is here discussed as an appropriate nexus for an analysis of the intersections between blackness and labour practices in the country.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Allen notes how the term workers was reserved for white people, while labourer was a term reserved for white people. There was thus a hierarchy to the ways in which black bodies entered the labour force and how white people entered the same.

³⁴⁸ Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*, 4.

³⁴⁹ Allen, 35.

Eadweard Muybridge: Repetition and the Science of Stopping Time

In the same century as the development of the mining industry in Southern African, Eadweard Muybridge, a British-American photographer, was conducting experiments on the study of motion. Born in the United Kingdom in 1830, Muybridge travelled to the United States during the height of its industrialisation. This included the development of the railway system across the country, and mining conquests such as the California Gold Rush of the late 1840s. Muybridge would embark on decades-long photographic projects, including the documentation of the disparities between the natural landscape of the Yosemite Valley, as well as the changes brought about by the industrial railway system. Alongside documentation of the vastness and mythical Californian landscape, he would simultaneously document the development of the cityscape. It was not until an encounter with railway developer Leland Stanford that Muybridge began his motion studies. As the story goes, Stanford had waged a bet with fellow businessmen about the movement of horses during races. Stanford argued that at some time during the race, all four legs of the horse do not touch the ground. Aware of Muybridge's existing work, Stanford commissioned Muybridge to conduct the experiment and, "[i]n the spring of 1872, a man [Muybridge] photographed a horse".³⁵⁰ This was to become the first of a long practice of attempting to stop time, or attempting to represent motion, and a study on what animate objects and subjects look like during movement. Muybridge is credited as one of the pioneers for developing cinema through his stop-frame animations.

In addition to his photographic and stop frame animation work, Muybridge lived out multiple identities throughout his life. As though repeating the obsessive repetitions of his practice,

³⁵⁰ Sonlit, *Motion Studies: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, 5.

Muybridge, born Edward Muggeridge, kept changing his name and adopting numerous identities as though living out the life of an alter ego.³⁵¹ In the same way that Sunstrum's alter ego Asme is able to adopt multiple personalities and exist in multiple spaces at different time periods, Muybridge first went to the States as a bookseller, and as Edward. He later sold his bookshop and changed his name to the well-known peculiar spelling, Eadweard Muybridge. When he later moved to Central America, where he photographed the local inhabitants, he changed his name to Eduardo Santiago Muybridge. His surname morphed from Muggeridge, to Muygridge, until finally resting on Muybridge. Separating himself into two people, his moniker, Helios, the Greek God of the sun, would take photographs while Muybridge would conduct the business of selling them.³⁵²

Muybridge's self-mythologising – through the act of continually changing his name, and with the association to sainthood (Santiago, meaning Saint James in Spanish) and godliness in Helios, is the exemplary morphing of science and mythology – albeit in a self-aggrandising manner – that Sunstrum seeks to explore in her work. The repetition did not only manifest through his practice, but as indicated with the continual name change, it did so through one of the most prominent markers of identity, that is, name changing. This continuous act was facilitated by the act of repeated self-re-invention, through a change in career, continually moving from one continent to another, and through the name changes. Asme, an alter ego of Sunstrum, is able to achieve the same. Through her representation in the Yosemite landscape, then a teleportation to the Kimberley mines in the 1880s, as well as an imagined alluvial volcanic eruption, Asme is able to live in multiple landscapes in different time periods. This traversal of space and time signals to the agential potential of black bodies to imagine and realise alternate realities to their current lived experiences. Sunstrum's selection of

³⁵¹ Sonlit, 7; Nicholls, *The Weird World of Eadweard Muybridge*.

³⁵² Sonlit, *Motion Studies: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, 40.

Muybridge as a figure who has realised, in reality, this multiplicity of being is telling. Could Sunstrum be subconsciously signalling to the ease with which Muybridge, a white man, was able to carry out the desires of his multiplicity while she is reliant on a moniker to realise the same? Reading Sunstrum's practice independent of Muybridge reveals that this is not the case. She has vehemently argued for the power of imagination, and echoing Robin Kelley's proclamation of the political power of the imagination, Sunstrum has advocated "treating the act of imagining as a political act".³⁵³

Sunstrum departs from Muybridge in a number of ways. While borrowing from his sequential, and often chronological movements, she instead pieces together non-sequential movements, events, and moments. She instead weaves together seemingly unrelated subject matter. She splices different imagery from one thing to another (such as a woman holding a bowl, then an erupting volcano in *Polyhedra*). The splicing of seemingly unrelated events and images is however not confusing. It is seamless and conducted with an alluring sensitivity that renders the transition un-jarring. The images continue to morph and change. Sunstrum does not provide the viewer with a lot of time to sit with each image, but the time provided is enough for the image to be engraved in the viewer's memory. Each video slots all of this imagery, concepts and themes in the short space of under 2 minutes. The shortness of the animations is a commentary on the experiences of time – compressing experiences of hours into mere seconds or minutes. The contemplative strategy is slow and silent. Its contemplation is as though Sunstrum is thinking through these concepts and we are thinking along with her. She is piecing together parts of an experiment – parts of her thoughts – and not presenting them as the final outcome or result of the experimentation. The strategy of

³⁵³ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*; Sunstrum, "Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices," np.

signalling to specific imagery and concepts, for a slowed down moment, is a signalling to the fugitive practices of the everyday lived experiences of black people.

The Colonial and Anthropometric Grid

In *spin*, Sunstrum borrows significantly from Eadweard Muybridge's studies, including the study of movement, the vastness of landscape, and the movement of humans and animals. It is, however, her borrowing of the technological device of the grid that is of particular interest to the concerns in this chapter. Following his collaboration with the railway investor and developer Leland Stanford and their work on studying horses in motion, Muybridge was invited by the University of Pennsylvania to further his motion research.³⁵⁴ Prior to his tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, Muybridge had predominantly been studying animal motion. But, in the early 1880s, there was a large scientific and anthropological community at the university that was interested in human movement, largely as a quest to advance the intellectual and physiological traits of white male students. Studies had therefore already been carried out, not only to differentiate white males from any other gender or race, but to also advance the academic performance of white men through scientific studies. Muybridge's study of movement and motion would be a significant contribution to the university's research. As such, in 1883, Muybridge began his tenure at the university, and continued his embarkation on the study of human motion. Following from his previous studies, the motion studies were conducted against a clear background, as can be seen in the 1881 work, *Running*, from the series *The Attitudes of Animals in Motion*. It was only later, with the motivation from the anthropologists and scientists on his team – that is, at the request of the university – that Muybridge began using the five by five centimetre photographic grid as a

³⁵⁴ Brown, "Racialising the Virile Body: Eadweard Muybridge's Locomotion Studies 1883-1887," 627.

measuring device for the motions he was studying. Furthermore, while Muybridge had been studying the motions of white men and women, he first began using the grid system when photographing mixed-raced boxer Ben Bailey in 1887.³⁵⁵ The Muybridgean grid was therefore a highly racialised (and gendered) measuring device of motion.

It is with this in mind that the Muybridgean grid becomes an anthropometric device. Anthropometry – the anthropological trope of measuring the human form – had been used in scientific and anthropological research to indicate the distinction between different races and largely to argue for the inferiority of black and brown people, and thus the superiority of white people. Anthropometry was used as a colonising tool. It was with Muybridge's photographing of Bailey that the anthropometric grid system was introduced to American photography. Moving forward, the Muybridgean anthropometric grid system was used on all his studies, including those of white men and women, and those of animals. It is therefore interesting that Sunstrum does not rid *spin* of the grid system in her own experiments of motions. In *spin*, Sunstrum chooses to simultaneously work with and against Muybridge through her overrepresentation of the confining structure of the grid.

It is to be understood that the grid is a form of standardisation. In anthropometry, it is a standardisation of the human figure. In motion studies, and in urban planning, it becomes the standardisation of how that body can move through the grid/frame, both spatially and temporally. While the anthropometric grid was used to capture the imagery and representation of the black body, the colonial grid system was used as a means to control how those bodies move through space. The grid has therefore been a source of enframement in more than one aspect of the colonial racialising project. The colonial grid systems were

³⁵⁵ Brown, 637.

implemented in African cities by colonial forces as a further controlling mechanism of the movement of black bodies. The grid plan is a means of dividing and designing a geographical area into rectangular blocks. The design of the grid plan is in such a way that roads and streets meet at right angles in a uniform manner. The purpose of the grid plan is to implement a certain kind of spatial organisation that enables control of the population who inhabit or move within the gridded area. The urban grid plan is historically understood to have been imposed by colonial structures on African land. It is understood primarily as a system that would bring a sense of familiarity to colonial settlers whose European cities were mostly designed around the grid. It was also implemented as a segregationist tool to divide the suburbs of the colonial settler and the settlement occupied by black people. Furthermore, the grid system was a means for the colonial government to control the movement of the black population.

Structures of monitoring the movement of black people in South Africa in particular include the 1828 Pass Law, which restricted the movement of black people, allowing them to enter certain ‘white only spaces’ only as labourers.³⁵⁶ The grid system was, however, not entirely new to all African societies. For example, Senegal is known for its pre-colonial grid system.³⁵⁷ When France occupied the country and introduced a grid system, they did not do so on a clean slate. The myth of Africa as terra incognita – an uninhabited land that has not been marked through cartography – has been debunked in recent years as early forms of a pre-colonial Senegalese grid system are brought to light.³⁵⁸ What is important for the purpose of the chapter is to understand the mechanisms with which geographical enframing was

³⁵⁶ Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*, 38.

³⁵⁷ Ross, “The Grid Plan in the History of Senegalese Urban Design,” 110.

³⁵⁸ Bigon and Hart, “Beneath the City’s Grid: Vernacular and (Post-)Colonial Planning Interactions in Dakar, Senegal,” 56–57.

implemented in Southern Africa, and how local inhabitants resisted the constrictions and enframement of the grid.

Moving Against the Grid

The grid is an organisational tool for space, movement and time. In her representation of the grid, Sunstrum opens up a possibility of representing what Moten calls ‘fugitive movement’ through distorting the grid, removing it from its geological superimposition, to its representation as an otherworldly device atop the cosmological terrain.³⁵⁹ The opening scene of *spin* is that of a few seconds of uncomfortable stillness. There is a bird encased in a grid, but the bird does not move for a few seconds. There is complete stillness, and, as if ushering the bird to movement, the grid begins to move along with it. At first glance, there does not appear to be anything amiss about the movement of the bird and the grid. However, when considering the standardisation aspect of the grid and its supposed objection as a constant (in the scientific sense of the word) in an experiment, we expect the grid to be still and motionless, and for the object of study to move inside it. The unsteadiness of the grid and its jarring movement indicate the inconsistency of the anthropometric grid system, which, even when used for scientific purposes, was always subjectified. This is to say, the measuring of black and brown bodies against the anthropometric system was never fully objective. The inconsistency of the grid in *spin* signals to its origins in subjectivity – the anthropometric grid always changed shape and form depending on who was doing the measuring and who was being measured.

³⁵⁹ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179.

There's a glitch in the motion of the bird – the grid and the bird seem to be stuck in uncomfortable contemplation, figuring out how to begin. The glitch is the uncertainty of the structure of the grid. The glitch is facilitated by a refusal of the bird to move within the structure of the grid. The outcome is that the grid itself begins to move. The bird is in flight, but only its wings are moving. In the end, an uncharacteristic event occurs when the grid negotiates its being around the movement of the bird instead of the other way around. I am interested in this gridded glitch not only as a malfunction of a technological system intended to enframe and constrict movement but also as a potential of fugitivity against the system. For the bird in *spin* – and, for the purpose of this chapter's close considerations of continental black lived experiences – I read the glitch through Tina Campt's notion of stasis, that is: “tensions produced by holding a complex set of forces in suspension”.³⁶⁰ For Campt, stasis is different to stillness in that “rather than motionlessness, what we see is an effortful equilibrium achieved through a laboured balancing of opposing forces and flows”.³⁶¹ In the glitch, subjects are able to assert their subjectivity and momentarily and quietly enforce their power on the systems that aim to disempower them. In the glitch, there is a momentary subjecthood that makes itself visible, and audible even in its silence. As argued above, the notion of black people standing still in spaces where they should be moving is an unsettling and threatening one for whiteness. Since black people are meant to occupy certain spaces only as labourers or passers-by, their stasis in a part of the grid where they are meant to always be in motion, can be an act of resistance.

I want to consider the bird's flight in relation to recent studies by Fred Moten, Daphne Brooks and Tina Campt of fugitivity and the flight of blackness. The notion of fugitivity is best understood as stemming from African-American discourse that centres the Fugitive

³⁶⁰ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 51.

³⁶¹ Campt, 51–52.

Slave Law as a point of transgression. The Fugitive Slave Law stated that slaves who escape their capture in states where slavery was legal (such as Virginia) and escape to non-slave areas (such as Philadelphia) could be apprehended and forcefully returned to their ‘owners’.³⁶² As such, an escape from slavery was not always a means of attaining freedom and the escaped slave would have to live as a fugitive who lives unlawfully in a particular place. Furthermore, fugitivity could not be understood in relation to complete freedom as this freedom was always constrained and prohibited.³⁶³ Fugitivity can be understood through what James Ford calls “the artful escape from objectification”.³⁶⁴ In discussing fugitivity and a refusal against oppressive structures, Tina Campt asserts that,

practicing refusal means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a ‘fugitive’ on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth. It is a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define black subject in the twenty-first-century logic of racial subordination.³⁶⁵

For Campt, fugitives are those who “cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned”.³⁶⁶ I read the momentary stasis at the beginning of *spin* as the disruption of normative capture and thus an act of fugitivity in what Tina Campt calls “the generative dimensions of stasis”.³⁶⁷ Embedded in the refusal of capture in the moment of stasis is a simultaneous self-granting of permission – permission to live freely, and if not freely, then fugitively in, through and around the corners of the grid. This tension between refusal and permission reveals itself to us through what Campt calls “the

³⁶² The slave Henry Box Brown escaped enslavement by mailing himself from Virginia to Philadelphia. (Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850 - 1910*, 4).

³⁶³ Paula von Gleich, “Afro-Pessimism, Fugitivity, and the Border to Social Death,” 203.

³⁶⁴ Ford, “Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination,” 3.

³⁶⁵ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 109–13.

³⁶⁶ Campt, 87.

³⁶⁷ Campt, 11.

quiet frequencies of stasis”.³⁶⁸ The frequencies that Campt speaks of are the sonic frequencies of black quotidian life. These are apparently inaudible moments that are not heard through listening, but rather activate other sensorial responses. It is the “infra-sonic frequencies” that are not audible to the human ear, but are felt, oftentimes as vibrations.

The glitch signals to the ‘ungovernability’ of blackness. The concept of ungovernability (or lawlessness of blackness) is problematic in that it presupposes a set of enforced misconceptions of how black people are meant to behave in a system that is designed to subjugate them. As Moten asks,

Is the designation of this or that thing as lawless, and the assertion that such lawlessness is a function of an already extant flaw, something more than that trying, even neurotic, oscillation between the exposure and the replication of a regulatory maneuver whose force is held precisely in the assumption that it comes before what it would contain?³⁶⁹

We can draw a number of conclusions from this assertion. Firstly, that lawlessness is a constructed system that is decided upon and implemented by a particular group to control the actions of another. Secondly, that law and lawlessness (or governability) is presented as prior to an enactment of a ‘crime’ or the imposition of government. In the case of the control of the movement of black people, ungovernability might have presented itself as black labourers working on a Cape Colony farm without a pass (identification document). Black people not owning land came after the Native Land Act was implemented in 1913, and only after that are black people criminals, unlawful and ungovernable if they own land or work in certain jurisdictions.³⁷⁰ As such, we are to understand that the crime was created first (constructed such that black people cannot own land), and then the law imposed (in 1913 through the

³⁶⁸ Campt, 58.

³⁶⁹ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

³⁷⁰ The 1913 Land Act reserved only seven percent of the country’s land for habitation by black people. The remaining ninety-three percent was given to white settlers. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 64.

Natives Land Act), and then the lawlessness and criminalisation of black people after that. Alluding to the problem of law and the judiciary system that are often put in place to criminalise blackness, Julius Malema – who was discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to Bopape’s *is i am sky* – has in the past encouraged black people to occupy land in what is seen as a ‘forced occupation of land’. The premise of his argument is that, there is nothing illegal about black people ‘forcefully’ occupying land because they owned that land in the first place. Malema states that

[w]hen we say to the people of SA 'occupy land', we don't say do illegal things. It is your right to have land. I can't go say occupy your house; it belongs to you. You must continue to occupy the land; it is yours... [The] majority of black people, where they stay, it was an illegal occupation. You see Soweto, they occupied it by force. Today it is the biggest township in Africa. You must continue to occupy by force. We are saying to the people in power; we are serious about land.³⁷¹

For the process of arriving at an anti-anti-black world, the ungovernability of blackness is a mode of exercising power and putting pressure on those subjugating systems. Like the bird in *spin*, it is remaining static in a space and moment where and when you are meant to be moving. It is acknowledging that movement is a problem for blackness because that movement is always racialised and implemented for the benefit of whiteness, and it is thus acknowledging the ironically fugitive practice of remaining still. Stasis here becomes an act of what Daphne Brooks calls “unruly black cultural performance”.³⁷² By studying the movement of blackness, Sunstrum exposes what Daphne Brooks calls “the tyranny of stillness” that has plagued black people’s lives since the imposition of colonial policies and systems such as the grid.³⁷³ The irony of the unruliness and the ungovernability of stasis exposes the fault of the systems of governability. Another way to think about it is that, for

³⁷¹ Malema cited in “Juju Strikes Again: 7 of Malema’s Most Disturbing Comments.”

³⁷² Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom, 1850 - 1910*, 9.

³⁷³ Brooks, 6.

whiteness and the structures of anti-blackness, blackness is the glitch, the technical malfunction of society. With that in mind, the ungovernability of an already malfunctional ontology of blackness is a further infliction of the problems that blackness poses for whiteness. It is with this in mind that ungovernability is here understood as a mode of enacting black fugitivity. The unfair dismissal of black people's daily refusal of the subjugating nature of the grid as ungovernability is a failure to account for the enabling fugitive practices fostered by the transgression of the rigidity of the grid.

The inconsistency of the grid in *spin* opens up the possibility of fugitivity. The bird in flight is able to fly out of the frame, to escape the frame, because of the precarity and instability of the structure of the anthropometric grid. As such, the relationship between the bird and the grid, while intended as a method of capture, control, and measurement, potentiates fugitivity. Through the glitch in the grid, the bird has the possibility of escape. The glitch in the grid reveals a gap that potentiates and enables fugitivity. The rigidity of the grid is evident in that the structures that erected the grid in 1481, in 1913, in 1948 South Africa, persist to this day. The grid is therefore a bordered structure that keeps being reinvented, even when black people find ways of escaping it. However, as argued above through the glitch in the grid, black fugitivity allows us to see the structural faults in the grid that could always be escaped, and that are always obstructed by lived black experiences and performances. But, as Paula von Gleich argues (borrowing from Wilderson and Sexton), the daily practise of fugitivity against what she calls the Black border – that is structural bordering – fail to correct the prohibitions that bordering imposes on blackness on a structural level. Instead, these gestures towards fugitivity register minutely on the bigger quest to dismantle anti-blackness.³⁷⁴ With this in mind, is it enough to consider the glitch in the grid as a measurable means to tackle the

³⁷⁴ Paula von Gleich, "Afro-Pessimism, Fugitivity, and the Border to Social Death," 207.

anti-black structures that created the grid in the first place? In other words, is the stasis at the beginning of *spin* enough to eradicate the imposition and classification of the movement of the bird in flight? Unlike the impermeable Black border of von Gleich, the grid in Sunstrum has always been already permeable.³⁷⁵ Sunstrum's grid has always contained leaky surfaces and corners that potentiate subversive acts even in the most dire circumstances. This is not to suggest a complete fragility of the grid and to undermine its catastrophic imposition on black lives – for, even within the act of fugitivity, the bird in flight is still encased and enframed by the rigidity of the grid. It is instead to acknowledge the fugitive acts, both minor and major, sometimes at all costs that black people enact on a daily basis. Furthermore, this is not to suggest that through resistant fugitive acts against the grid there is potential to eliminate or even slightly shift the position and structural make-up of the grid. Instead, I want to draw attention to the daily struggles and negotiations that black people had with this imposed system. The notion of going against the grid is here understood as resisting a system that you know might not be breakable, but still insisting on agentially asserting and exercising, in creative ways, whatever power you have against the grid.

The fugitivity enacted by black Africans is not only a fugitivity away from precarity, subjugation, displacement and dispossession. It is also a fugitivity towards futurity, towards the black African futurity articulated by Sunstrum in her text *Afro-mythology and African Futurisms: The Politics of imagining and methodologies for contemporary creative research practices*. Fleeing one's current enframed and gridded past and present is a flight towards a "future that hasn't happened but must".³⁷⁶ I argue that fugitive flight to "free territory" on earth is further prohibited by existing anti-black policies and structures that are near

³⁷⁵ Von Gleich later argues that it is the border of afro-pessimism that is impermeable. Fugitivity for her does allow for a negation of the border and does potentiate a refusal, but the fugitive can never pay claim to civil society Paula von Gleich, 210.

³⁷⁶ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 107.

impossible to break down.³⁷⁷ While this is not to suggest the impossibility of terranean black fugitivity, through *spin*, I consider a fugitive flight to superterraneous (that is above the earth's surface) platforms as fugitivity towards black African futurity. Escaping the arresting compulsion and capacity of the grid is both a lived experience of blackness, as well as a continual future aspiration.

Fugitive Flight Towards African Futurity

The grid is a metaphor for the capture of blackness. This begins with the conception of the objecthood of blackness. The fugitivity from the grid is the lived experiences of black people – thinking about Moten and the difference between blackness and black people's experiences, between object and thing. In Sunstrum, this fugitivity becomes manifest in speculative practices and speculative futurities. The labour of black miners was fugitive. While working in a system that amassed capital for white mine owners, the fugitivity towards futurity lied in the initial reason for black labourers working in the mines. This was done to get enough income to purchase firearms for future battles with white settlers.³⁷⁸ As such, “the determination of Africans to maintain their own institutions and ways of life against the pressures of encroaching colonial capitalism” were always imposed against “the format of black employment”.³⁷⁹

Black people often took drastic measures – some which were detrimental to their wellbeing – in order to escape the capture of white supremacy. The Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856 and 1857 is a case in point. It could be seen as a ‘failed attempt’ at fugitivity, but I argue that

³⁷⁷ Paula von Gleich, “Afro-Pessimism, Fugitivity, and the Border to Social Death,” 203.

³⁷⁸ In past battles, such as the Fifth Frontier War of 1819 and the War of the Axe of 1846 – 7, settlers had routinely gained an upper hand by having guns and ammunition over the spear and shield of the black side.

³⁷⁹ Allen, *History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: The Techniques of Resistance, 1871 - 1948 Volume 1*, 35.

there are no failed attempts at fugitivity and that all fugitive acts are forms of resistance. Black people across the country were killing off their cattle, which had been infected with Lung sickness brought to Southern Africa from Holland in 1853.³⁸⁰ As their cattle and main source of livelihood were already dying, cattle-killing prophecies proliferated across the country. In some cases, such as the famous account by a young girl, Nongqawuse, argued that if cattle were killed, their dead would rise again and help them fight against the colonial government. The panic that led to these killings was also motivated by the fear that, should action not be taken to rectify the catastrophe of the diseased and dying animals, more black people would have to fall victim to the migrant labour system. As such, I see the events of the Cattle-Killing Movement, which resulted in the death of about 200 000 cattle, as a quest towards fugitivity as black Africans were fighting, resisting, and refusing, at all odd, to escape the capture of migrant labour.

This kind of perhaps ‘failed fugitivity’ is seen as escapist by Achille Mbembe.³⁸¹ In his contentious text about the actions of black Africans in the face of adversity, Mbembe argues that “[t]he Nongqawuse syndrome”, a name given to the kinds of actions reflected in the Cattle-Killing Movement – “is a populist rhetoric and a millenarian form of politics which advocates, uses and legitimises self-destruction, or national suicide, as a means of salvation”.³⁸² Mbembe sees the Cattle-Killing Movement as “nativist revivalism” – which is also “a by-product of dispossession” – and a destructive means for black Africans who are unable to contend with the conditions imposed upon them, and who, lacking intellectual strategies to combat the conditions, resort to believes in “the craft of witches and occult forces” that would miraculously alter their precarious, inhumane conditions. He further contends that this kind of “black nativism” is conceptualised and implemented to “create a

³⁸⁰ Allen, 65.

³⁸¹ Mbembe, “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome,” np.

³⁸² Mbembe, “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome.”

common language of grievance” that often results in suicide.³⁸³ I, on the other hand, argue that, while the outcome of these radical fugitive acts borne out of despair and hopelessness may have resulted in catastrophic results for the black population – thousands of people died of starvation – they are exemplary of the ongoing fugitivity of blackness, even through drastic measures, to escape the clutches of white supremacy. I see the conceptualisation and implementation of these drastic measures as a continued negotiation against the grid and its structures. The common language that these fugitive acts elicit is refusal and resistance. These acts are sometimes successful, and sometimes self-destructive. And while Mbembe inadvertently portrays suicide – perhaps as a form of social death – as an escape mechanism and an inability to skilfully fight the system, I see it as an act of refusal. Like the slaves who jumped overboard slave ships, thus deliberately choosing death over the inhumanity of slavery, suicide could perhaps be seen as the ultimate fugitive refusal to exist as sub-human, choosing instead to not exist at all. What is important to acknowledge, therefore, is the continuous quotidian quests to attain freedom through this fugitivity, sometimes at all costs. If blackness is socially and politically constructed as a kind of “being-towards-death” how can we make sense of potentially fugitive suicidal acts?³⁸⁴

The ease with which Mbembe reduces African spiritual practices as a quest towards fugitivity is counter to Sunstrum’s understanding and implication of fugitive African spiritual practices towards futurity. In as much as Sunstrum signals to a move against the grid, she at once moves against Mbembe’s anti-African spiritual proclivities. For Sunstrum, everything can be linked to ancestry, an integral part of black social life. When Nongqawuse prophesied that the dead would resurrect to help fight against the imposition of whiteness, it was their ancestors

³⁸³ Mbembe, np.

³⁸⁴ Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

who would be resurrected and help bring about peace. Sunstrum whimsically gestures towards this African spiritualism towards an African futurity in *Polyhedra*.

The Rupture: Grammars of Geology, Extraction and Inhumanism

Polyhedra begins with a scene of polyhedral shapes superimposed onto a flowing river. This superimposition of the shapes and the water gives an impression of the measurement of the river. The juxtapositioning of the measuring devices and the water ushers in a conversation about the nature of the geological and continuous investigations of how they are made to operate in the world. The geological in *Polyhedra* is mobilised in the rest of the video mainly through a concern with the mining industry in Southern Africa and its long history of forced and racialised labour, as outlined above. It appears further through astrological calculations and their measurement of how the earth works, images of landscapes, and of particular interest for the purpose of the chapter, the volcanic eruption that occurs halfway through the video. This journey into mining is put forward by Sunstrum as an exploration of how black bodies engage with the geological through mining, and how that potentially damages the (pre-colonial) relationships they may have had with the land.

The operation of the geological that Sunstrum sets out to investigate is not only the supposedly objectively scientific and mathematical. Her investigation into the ways the earth works signals to an always already subjectivised position, thus complicating any assumptions of what Kathryn Yusoff calls an assumed innocence of the geological and its place in the world.³⁸⁵ Sunstrum seems to want to lead us to the realisation that the earth does not operate without the input of politically and capitalistically driven motivations. The politics that

³⁸⁵ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 10.

Sunstrum is most interested in highlighting are racial politics as they relate to geology and putting a spotlight on how the intersection between race and geology are inscribed on the black body and on daily black lived experiences. Departing from the possibility of superterranean fugitivity in *spin*, in *Polyhedra*, Sunstrum ushers in a discussion around the potentialities of subterranean-ness, that is, below the surface of the earth. This is done through the eruption of the volcano that brings to the surface of the earth whatever matter lies inside the centre of the earth. It is also done with the depiction of the mining instruments taken from the Wits Mining School that pours glistening material from the surface of the earth, into its centre. The imagery of the volcano signals Sunstrum's returns to early subterranean fiction through the work of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Universe*. She marries this reference with that of African mythologist Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa and his narratives of "a subterranean world presided over by a telepathic giantess, protected by a mechanical spider and networked to the aboveground world through a trans-dimensional cave-portal".³⁸⁶ The foregrounding of the subterranean through the volcano is exemplary of the artist's belief that "[v]olcanoes are our glimpses into the inner subterranean parts of the earth".³⁸⁷ It is these two moments in the video, the cascading diamond-like matter inside the earth, and the unearthing of similar minerals through the eruption that are compelling.

These moments help us think the relationship between black bodies, labour and geology, both historically, and in contemporary discussions of geology. With this in mind, I want to think the cascading of diamond-like material into the earth's belly as representative of black miners who descend into the mines of Southern Africa in search of gold and other minerals for predominantly white-owned mining conglomerates. This descending into the mines should be considered through the fact that some people die inside the mines, and are sometimes left

³⁸⁶ Sunstrum, "Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices," np.

³⁸⁷ Sunstrum, personal conversation, 2018.

there, unrecovered. Put differently, Sunstrum compels us to consider the relationship between race and geology not only through black people who work in the mines, but also through the dead bodies of black mine workers who have been “embedded within landscapes” and are irretrievably lost during mining accidents.³⁸⁸ Sunstrum asserts that “[i]t is difficult to think about mines without thinking about the bodies that are sacrificed in order to realise them”.³⁸⁹ In the context of Southern Africa, the bodies that Sunstrum speaks of are black men’s bodies. They are the bodies that migrate from all corners of the country to work in the mines, and they are the bodies that sometimes die in those mines, and, if unrecovered, are denied and refused a proper burial. This speaks to how black bodies are always sacrificed for the economic profit of whiteness in what Yusoff calls “colonial extractive practices”, whose outcome renders black people as disposable; while black bodies are essential to generate wealth for white supremacy through their labour, they are simultaneously disposable.³⁹⁰ The disposability of black bodies is that which contributes to their supposed existence outside of humanity, as nonbeing, because it does not allow them the same kind of importance (and indisposability) that is afforded other kinds of bodies.

A descension into the mines is a continuous repeated symbolic death. The process of the miners descension is here understood as a move from subjecthood to objecthood in what Yusoff might refer to as the “unmaking of [subjecthood]”.³⁹¹ The death suffered by the miners is both physical and metaphorical. Either way, the mine functions as a graveyard of black lives and bodies, and of black subjectivity. The descension into the mines, whether or not the bodies of the descenders surface at the end of a workday, means they come up having suffered a death, sometimes of subjectivity, thus ascending into an afterlife of objectivity.

³⁸⁸ Sunstrum, personal communication, 2018.

³⁸⁹ Sunstrum, personal communication, 2018.

³⁹⁰ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 5.

³⁹¹ Yusoff, 5.

The deaths of black men in the mines of South Africa – a great number since the beginning of the mining industry – has instigated an unceremonious and un-ritualistic erasure of those bodies from existence. By virtue of the fact that they remain unrecovered, they remain forever embedded in the nooks and crannies of the inner most part of the earth. This failure of recovery is detrimental to the last ontological state of blackness on the continent, where, after death, performances are carried out on the body and structures are put in place to usher a person into the world of ancestry. As such, a failure of recovery refuses the miners the final black ontological state of blackness, that is, the ontology of ancestry. It is with this in mind that Sunstrum's eruption can be read in light of recoverability through her continued interest in mythological creations of the universe. Through the eruption, an alternate origin story for the dead miners comes into being, where their death refuses finality and demands a further, ancestral-based, ontological quest. It is here that the volcano in *Polyhedra* potentiates the unearthing of the many dead miners to the surface of the earth in order to carry out this continued ontology of blackness through ancestral practice.

The eruption of the volcano in *Polyhedra* disrupts our acceptance of the fate of dead miners as unrecoverable. Sunstrum encourages us to ask whether the eruption has the potential to unearth the many bodies that have un-ritualistically been buried in the underground. Are they being forced to the surface of the earth through the eruption in demand for a proper burial? Are they finally been given the opportunity to occupy the final ontological state of blackness in Southern Africa, that is, becoming an ancestor? Sunstrum helps us imagine what the process of unearthing the bodies of the dead miners would entail. She surreptitiously achieves this through the metaphor of the dead black bodies as the material that first cascades down as diamond-like substances into the earth, and again when diamonds surface through the volcanic eruption. In other words, the fragments that are seen to emerge, rather violently,

from the centre of the earth in the video's eruption, while aesthetically resembling diamonds or other subterranean material, are metaphorically the black bodies of the miners who were violently buried in the mines. The regurgitation of the diamonds as symbolic for the resurfacing of miners recalls Yusoff's linkage between black people and resources such as gold. Yusoff asserts that "[h]istorically, both slaves and gold have to be material and epistemically made through the recognition and extraction of their inhuman properties".³⁹² She refers to the fact that "the Gold Coast [was] a source of both gold and slaves", thus making no distinction between black bodies that were a source of economic advancement and gold that was meant to achieve the same thing.³⁹³ Gold as a resource and a material is inhuman and has economical function for whiteness in the same way that blackness is discussed as being outside of humanity, and therefore inhuman, while having a function towards economic growth for whiteness. Therefore, "gold shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogical extraction".³⁹⁴ Blackness and extracted matter are therefore divided "into nonlife" through a "biopolitical category of nonbeing" where "slaves [or the lives of black people in general are] being exchanged for and as gold".³⁹⁵ Gold being extracted from the earth is also similar to the lives that black people lose through the extraction of their humanity in an anti-black world.

The relationship between blackness and gold or diamonds leads to a discussion about the value of blackness and the value of the lives of black people. The assumption is that, black lives have no ontological value, or the value of blackness is equitable to nothingness, as discussed in Chapter 1. Echoing Calvin Warren's reading of blackness and nothingness, and that of formlessness discussed in Chapter 1, Denise Ferreira da Silva states that

³⁹² Yusoff, 3.

³⁹³ Yusoff, 10.

³⁹⁴ Yusoff, 5.

³⁹⁵ Yusoff, 5.

[i]n 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 scene.³⁹⁶

With this in mind, the emergence of the diamonds from the earth's belly and its relation to the emergence of the bodies of the dead miners who have been buried alongside the diamond in said belly becomes a valid, albeit strained, comparison. It is strained because, by stating that the black bodies in the belly of the earth come to the surface through the volcanic eruption might seem to confirm and perpetuate blackness as matter, as thingliness. However, for the purposes of disrupting the damaging nature of unrecoverability, reading the black bodies through their synonym with the diamonds open up a potentially generative conversation for the recoverability of the miners. We might therefore not only see the black bodies as purely synonymous with the diamonds that are unearthed in the eruption, but rather that the eruption of the matter potentiates a generative resurfacing of the bodies of the dead miners. The diamonds, a product of the centre of the earth, become allies that can mean something different for blackness other than subjugation, negation, and extraction. Extraction in this sense also bears with it a generative capacity, where the 'extraction', here seen as exhumation, of the bodies of the dead miners becomes a positive thing for the recoverability of dead and forgotten black bodies.

Sunstrum, through the volcano, recalls Yusoff, who helps us come to terms with the never-ending classifications of blackness as being outside the human, but this time, through the notion of geology and what Yusoff refers to as "environmental racism".³⁹⁷ This continues the

³⁹⁶ Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," 9.

³⁹⁷ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 5.

Black Optimists and even Afro-pessimist thinking of blackness and its relationship to humanism and humanity albeit through “the twined discourses of geology and humanism”.³⁹⁸ The relationship between blackness and geology includes the fact that the “history of Blackness by its very negation in the category of nonbeing within economies of Whiteness lives differently in the earth”.³⁹⁹ It is this living differently on earth for blackness that is interesting in *Polyhedra*. It is also with this in mind that Sunstrum’s volcanic eruptions are fugitive in themselves. The eruptions unearth the jewels of the earth – diamonds in this case – that are the cause of the dehumanisation of black people. By bringing the jewels to the surface of the earth, they potentiate a world where black bodies need not enter the earth in search of them. The earth in Sunstrum is seen as working in tandem with blackness, providing a useful ally towards its fugitivity. The eruption, in those spaces where black bodies are trapped in the earth’s belly, also suggest a resurrection of the bodies, a recoverability that had previously been denied. The recoverability of the black bodies that have previously been presumed unrecoverable emerges through what Ferreira da Silva calls “the scene of obliteration” where political subjects can emerge.⁴⁰⁰ The obliteration in Ferreira da Silva manifests through blackness being denied life or a life that matters. The obliteration is of the disappearance of the subjecthood of blackness as that which has value and form, and that which matters in the world. It is the move to classifying blackness as nothing, thus obliterating any form of somethingness it may have.⁴⁰¹ What is being obliterated in *Polyhedra* is a material in the centre of the earth, and that obliteration potentiates recognition of the subjecthood of those that have been left to die inside the earth’s core. As such, the obliteration as it appears in the video is an obliteration of the objecthood of blackness, and the obliteration of the status of the disposability of black people. The obliteration of this

³⁹⁸ Yusoff, 5.

³⁹⁹ Yusoff, 9.

⁴⁰⁰ Ferreira da Silva, “1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” 1.

⁴⁰¹ Ferreira da Silva, 9.

objecthood is a move towards subjecthood, and should thus be seen as always already restitutive of the humanity of blackness. Furthermore, the bodies resurface through Mutwa's "trans-dimensional cave-portals" onto the surface of the earth, ready for proper burial and an ascension from its imposed death.⁴⁰² It is thus compelling to think the geological in *Polyhedra* alongside Yusoff's "indigenous relations with 'dead' matter".⁴⁰³ This relationship with dead matter is not only the relationship that black people had with gold and diamonds prior to the racialisation of geology and its latent acts of violent racism. Dead matter in relation to racialised geology is metaphoric of the black miners, both before the descension and subsequent ascension into the mines. The dead matter is also symbolic of the bodies that descend the mines and remain there, unrecovered and unrecoverable.

The eruption of the volcano that subsequently unearths this 'black matter', to use Yusoff's term, is illustrative of what Ferreira da Silva calls "blackness's disruptive force".⁴⁰⁴ What blackness disrupts in the scene of obliteration are the mechanisms that would dictate the ways in which blackness is meant to deal with the violence imposed against it. This is to say, by refusing the unceremonious burial imposed through mining deaths, and being brought back to the surface of the earth through the volcanic eruption, blackness as a force disrupts the comfortable anti-black remarks and policies that would have the bodies left buried inside the mines. It is interesting to consider the notion of blackness as matter (or dark matter) through Ferreira da Silva's exploration into the contemporary Black studies assertion that 'Black Lives Matter'. Ferreira approaches this assertion through a question, by paying attention to the reasons that necessitated the assertion of the statement in the first place. This leads her to

⁴⁰² Mutwa cited in Sunstrum, "Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices," np.

⁴⁰³ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 10.

⁴⁰⁴ Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," 1.

ask, “Why don’t black lives matter?”⁴⁰⁵ This brings a different perspective to the relationship between blackness and matter discussed above, where blackness and black life is that which “*does not matter*”.⁴⁰⁶ The matter of blackness, and in particular black life, is here not only attributed to its physicality and its thingliness, but also to its value or lack thereof. If black life does not matter, then it is easy for mining conglomerates to be unbothered by the black people who die in their mines. Because black life *is* matter (to be acquired and used in the same as gold), it *does not matter* because it does not have the same kind of importance as those inside of humanity. For this reason, a loss of life in the mines is merely a loss in the same way as one would lose something material – it is not a loss in the sense of there being a loss of important, valuable life.

Sunstrum’s volcanic eruption presents an enactment of rupture and disruption (of the system) as it relates to blackness. Disruption is here understood as fugitive micro-aggressions against the system or the grid. It is the daily manifestations and performances of black radicality – that is, following from Moten, the daily pressuring of the proper.⁴⁰⁷ It is understood as black people’s continuously putting pressure on cyclical enforcements of anti-blackness through radical black fugitive performances. Rupture, on the other hand is the macro-reaction to an accumulation of both micro- and macro-aggressions. It connotes the sense of fullness, of a chemical reaction to a situation that has gone above and beyond the capacity it can contain. This is explored in *Polyhedra* through what Édouard Glissant calls the “aesthetics of rupture”.⁴⁰⁸ This aesthetic of rupture in Sunstrum appear through the process of the volcanic eruption, where material and substances are unearthed from the centre of the earth. Sunstrum’s volcanic eruption is read as a rupture against the grid and its systematic anti-

⁴⁰⁵ Ferreira da Silva, 8.

⁴⁰⁶ Ferreira da Silva, 8.

⁴⁰⁷ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness.”

⁴⁰⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 151.

black impositions. There is something generative in the notion of the rupture as something that comes to destabilise and undermine the status quo. Christina Sharpe reads rupture through temporality, asserting that “[i]n the wake [of blackness], the past that is not past reappears always to rupture the present”.⁴⁰⁹ In *Polyhedra*, the classification of dead miners as part of the past is illusory as their deaths are always present in the contemporary moment through the ongoing violence black bodies still have to face in mines today. As such, the death of these men as existing in the past is an incorrect assertion, primarily because their undiscovered bodies deny a conclusion and closure to their narratives. The volcanic eruption, to call on Sharpe, becomes a way that their buried and unfinished stories come to be forced into our present imagination. The temporal disruption and disjuncture potentiated by the volcanic eruption recalls Denise da Silva’s assertion that “blackness as *matter* signals [infinity], another world: namely, that which exists without time and out of space, in the plenum”.⁴¹⁰ This existing in the plenum for Sunstrum is made possible through the attainment of the status of ancestry, which is attainable through the process of proper burial rituals and practices.

At the heart of *Polyhedra* is the relationship between blackness and geology. Following on from Yusoff, in *Polyhedra*, we are made to think “race and geology across the rifts of broken earths” and to think “geology as a racial formation from the onset”.⁴¹¹ Yusoff helps us think *Polyhedra* through the manners in which colonialism “enacted the cutting of geographical ties to land and attachment to ecologies” for black people.⁴¹² This cut was reserved for blackness in order to force it to have a different relationship with its geographies. The main relationship they were meant to have to the land was firstly one of displacement, and one

⁴⁰⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 9.

⁴¹⁰ Ferreira da Silva, “1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” 10.

⁴¹¹ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, xi; xiv.

⁴¹² Yusoff, xii.

where black people were puppets and labourers of the extraction perpetrated by what Yusoff calls “White Geology”.⁴¹³ Geology for Yusoff is “a mode of accumulation, on one hand, and of dispossession, on the other, depending on which side of the geological color line you end up on”.⁴¹⁴ Yusoff continues to state that,

[i]t is not just that geology is a signifier for extraction but that a transmutation of matter occurs within that signification that renders matter as property, that makes a delineation between agency and inertness, which stabilizes the *cut* of property and enacts the removal of matter from its constitutive relations as both subject and mineral embedded in sociological and ecological fields.⁴¹⁵

By bringing erased and forgotten black bodies to the surface, the volcanic eruptions unearth “the possibility of gravity that defies antiblackness”.⁴¹⁶ The black bodies that are unearthed through the volcanic eruption are the “ghosts of geology’s epistemic and material modes of categorization and dispossession”.⁴¹⁷ Sunstrum’s unearthing of the bodies through the volcanic eruption is an undermining of the process of erasure brought about by White Geological extraction. White Geology enacts its violence on blackness through “the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth”.⁴¹⁸ When the volcano erupts in *Polyhedra*, what spews out of the earth, in addition to the imagined bodies of the black people who died from the violence of White Geology’s extraction, are traces of these toxic materials that cause damage to blackness. Sunstrum’s highlighting of the dead and buried miners is cause for close inspection. Through it, she stresses the status of the buried miners as part of what Yusoff calls “the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake” as

⁴¹³ Yusoff, xi.

⁴¹⁴ Yusoff, 3.

⁴¹⁵ Yusoff, 4.

⁴¹⁶ Yusoff, xi–xii.

⁴¹⁷ Yusoff, xii.

⁴¹⁸ Yusoff, xii.

well as “the afterlife of this disruption as an ongoing struggle of reorientation”.⁴¹⁹ However, in Sunstrum, the racialised subjects have in fact been denied their subjecthood through the process of erasure and of having been forgotten, as they lay lifeless, intended to be there for eternity, at the bottom of these mines. The erasure of the bodies of dead miners is synonymous with and exemplary of the erasure of “histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structures of geological relations”.⁴²⁰

The proximity of blackness to the dangers and toxicities of the earth – that which appears through mining in *Polyhedra*, and therefore through the premise of harm – is what Yusoff calls “the Black Anthropocene”.⁴²¹ The Black Anthropocene is a call for White Geology to understand the racial implications of geology’s violence and of the relationship between humanity and our geographies. It includes the premise that contemporary notions of the apocalyptic and dystopian nature of the relation between people and the environment is not a new occurrence, but is rather imagined as new because it now affects the lives of white people, in addition to affecting the lives of black and brown people. It is the notion that the link between whiteness (or White Geography) and the Anthropocene – which is “the cautionary tale of planetary predicament” – and the harm that has been done is not only to the environment, but also to black bodies that were forced into a relationship with the land that is based on forced labour and extraction.⁴²² The Black Anthropocene brings a new perspective on notions of dystopia and the apocalypse or the end of the world as it surmises that whiteness has been bringing about the systematic end of the world for blackness through slavery, settler-colonialism, and other oppressive systems.⁴²³ As such, the Anthropocene should not be presented as a “‘new’ condition” because doing so means forgetting “its

⁴¹⁹ Yusoff, 2; 7.

⁴²⁰ Yusoff, 2.

⁴²¹ Yusoff, xii.

⁴²² Yusoff, 2.

⁴²³ Yusoff, xiii.

histories of oppression and dispossession”.⁴²⁴ Perhaps what is new about this Anthropocenic condition is whom it is affecting, that is, white lives are now in the firing line of the fear of ‘end of the world’. These consequences of the making of ‘modernity and freedom’ that led to the current condition of the Anthropocene were allowed to occur through the ambitions of White Geology. This occurrence has left in its wake the erasure of the stories of black people and their relationship to the land as well as how this White Geological ambition is the reason for the current apocalyptic mood of the world. Yusoff concludes that “*Black Anthropocene* marks an interjection or erasure that is a billion missing articulations of geologic events to provide a counterforce of gravity to the historical junctures” that created the problem of the Anthropocene.⁴²⁵ The imagined and buried dead miners in *Polyhedra* are part of the billion missing articulations that are a consequence of erasure and omission, and are the effects of White Geology on the bodies of black forced labourers and on blackness in general. Yusoff highlights the fact that instead of the singular destructive and apocalyptic Anthropocene that has brought “environmental harm to white liberal communities”, black communities have endured many of these catastrophes at the hands of whiteness and White Geology in particular.⁴²⁶ In *Polyhedra*, Sunstrum can be seen to begin to perform with Yusoff, to call on “Blackness [as] a material index of resistance to the projection of [the] Anthropocenic New World-Old World globalization geography”.⁴²⁷ With and through Yusoff, Sunstrum “[refuses] the neat placing of Anthropocene geosocial ‘events’ in geology and the reverberations of colonization that they represent” by metaphorically unearthing the bodies of the miners who have died in the mines, and forcing history to deal with their deaths, with

⁴²⁴ Yusoff, 3.

⁴²⁵ Yusoff, xiii.

⁴²⁶ Yusoff, xiii.

⁴²⁷ Yusoff, xiii.

their bodies, and with the overall violence done to blackness through the guise of extraction and White Geologically-based progress.⁴²⁸

Conclusion

The chapter has shown how the two video artworks, *spin* and *Polyhedra* by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum draw on mathematical and scientific experimentation to argue against norms of oppression and subjugation that these disciplines have produced and maintained against blackness. Through the videos, Sunstrum makes us think about the effects that certain kinds of experimentations – including the anthropometric grid as well as geological calculations and conquests – have had on blackness and on the black body. In so doing, she disrupts the authority of experimentation by carrying out her own ‘unauthorised’ and, more interestingly, ‘unqualified’ experiments that do not begin from the basis of proper and accepted science. In conducting these scientific experiments that are in fact outside of science, she nonetheless qualifies her actions by claiming its validity. The validity in Sunstrum’s non-scientific experiments lies in the way in which it makes us think blackness and its relationship to the body, to anthropometry, and to geology.

At the centre of the relationships between race, anthropometry and geology has been the notion of fugitivity. Both *spin* and *Polyhedra* map out the ways in which black bodies are controlled and how the lives of black people are dictated by superstructures that aim to relegate blackness to a state of inhumanity. This happens through the process of labour and migrancy, as well as how black men descend and ascend the mines in search of gold. Historically these labours have also involved how black people move within the city grid to

⁴²⁸ Yusoff, xiii–xiv.

and from their roles as labourers and how their movements are policed and curtailed. What is pertinent to *spin* and *Polyhedra* are how these systems of control are always disrupted and disputed by black people – herein lies the fugitive acts that are at the heart of blackness’s daily acts of refusal. Through these fugitive acts, whether through stasis in *spin* or macro-eruptions in *Polyhedra*, blackness is seen to always move towards futurity in generative and enabling ways.

spin offers an interesting account of refusing policed movement through Tina Campt’s notion of stasis.⁴²⁹ The stasis in *spin*, read as the bird’s monetary refusal to move in the anthropometric grid, undermines the gridded system that is designed to control it. By refusing to move when it should be moving, the bird illustrates acts of refusal and fugitivity practiced by black people on a daily basis. In *Polyhedra*, Sunstrum recalls Kathryn Yusoff and Denise Ferreira da Silva and their conversations about the relationships between geology and race. Through Yusoff, she helps us think about environmental racism and about White Geology’s history of extraction that has black bodies at its nexus.⁴³⁰ Ferreira da Silva signals to the classification of blackness as matter and the atemporality of blackness as that which collapses time-space continuum. Sunstrum collates these two thinkers in *Polyhedra* through the miners who die during these extraction exercises and are left unrecovered inside the mines. While these bodies are rendered unrecoverable by the violent systems that led to their deaths, Sunstrum sees the potential of their fugitivity from the centre of the earth, back to its surface, and afforded an opportunity for proper burial. The consequence of the proper burial is that the miners are allowed to achieve the ‘final’ ontological stage in Southern African black life, which is to become an ancestor. The eruption of the volcano therefore potentiates the invention of selfhood that drives Sunstrum’s practice. This invented selfhood that is

⁴²⁹ Campt, *Listening to Images*.

⁴³⁰ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

facilitated through the obliteration of the centre of the earth and its subsequent unearthing of the bodies of dead miners, is a kind of looking towards futurity for blackness and black people. It indicates that death in Southern African customs is in fact not final, but is the beginning of the process of ancestry, thus signalling to an always-attainable futurity for blackness.

Chapter 3: The Spectre: *Concrete Affection* and Ghosts as Ontological and Temporal Visions

Introduction

Kiluanji Kia Henda's video, performance and photographic work considers the impact of colonialism on modern day Angola. He looks at moments in Angola's history that aim to find "an opposition to the glorious colonial past" and re-represents these moments in comical and speculative ways.⁴³¹ In so doing, Henda responds to Africa's necessary preoccupation with history and memory, and intimates possible futures for it and its people. He not only sets out to highlight the effects of colonialism, but is also attentive to those acts of resistance against colonial structures. His ongoing interdisciplinary project, *Homen Novo (New Man)* is a response to the socialist period after Angola's independence, a time that saw the country embroiled in years of civil war. *Homen Novo* was a 'movement' that took place predominantly in Luanda in 1976, a year after independence. It consisted of "taking down all the monuments [of colonial figures] and changing the names of streets that [were] somehow still a celebration of the colonial period".⁴³² These monuments were stored in Fortaleza de São Miguel, a fort that was built by the Portuguese in the 1500s. Today, it functions like a graveyard for this colonial history, with the sculptures still accessible for view. Henda's 2014 video *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* fits within his impulse of trying to understand the effects of colonialism on black people in Angola.

The video is a return to the period leading up to the November 1975 moment of Angola's independence. It is influenced by the first chapter of *Another Day of Life*, a book by Polish

⁴³¹ Henda, "(<https://www.foam.org/talent/spotlight>) INTERVIEW WITH KILUANJI KIA HENDA."

⁴³² Henda, np.

Press Agency's African correspondent Ryszard Kapuściński, wherein he recounts his experience of being sent to Luanda at the dénouement of the Portuguese Colonial War.⁴³³ Tensions were high in the city as Portuguese colonial settlers prepare to leave and return to Portugal. Simultaneously, three Angolan-led political parties (FNLA, UNITA and MPLA) were already embroiled in conflict over who will take over the country once it gains its independence. *Concrete Affection* is a meditation on that expectant moment – the pre-event of independence. Beginning with an aerial shot of a desert, rocky, tree-less mountains populating the horizon, the establishing shot of *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*, hereinafter referred to as *Concrete Affection*, is accompanied by the suggestive and prophetic phrase, “Everything is arid” and sets the dystopian mood of the rest of the film.⁴³⁴ The video is dated October 1975 in the opening credits and portrays the events of the eve of Angola's independence that November. A man's voice, in the form of a voice-over, presumably that of Kapuściński, narrates the events of this historic moment after he awakens from a nightmare on the day before he joins the *retornados* out of Luanda. The camera follows the voice as we are shown footage from Luanda's harbour, the site where the Portuguese settlers would have arrived in the 1500s. This is also the site from where, as described by Kapuściński, European ships, still trading in cotton and coffee, would approach and recede depending on the nature of the threat of war on Luanda.⁴³⁵ Henda's port is populated by cargo ships, and yet no human activity is discernible.

The figure (that is the voice) in the video contemplates the end of Luanda, a city that is “being stripped of its memory” as the inhabitants are forced to pack their belongings and leave.⁴³⁶ During this crucial moment of a revolution in progress, the character walks the

⁴³³ Kapuściński, *Another Day of Life*.

⁴³⁴ Henda, *Concrete Affection - Zopo Lady*.

⁴³⁵ Kapuściński, *Another Day of Life*, 3.

⁴³⁶ Henda, *Concrete Affection - Zopo Lady*.

empty, uninhabited streets of Luanda, his “last around the city”, and he looks for his loved one, his Zopo Lady, whom we later learn is the city itself.⁴³⁷ We hear the disembodied male voice, at no point seeing his physical appearance, as it is superimposed against scenes of the harbour, then interiors of apartment buildings, city blocks, and later returning to the scene of the harbour when he finally decides to leave, seeing ‘his’ city Luanda from the horizon as the ships return to Europe, from whence they came. A voice narrates Kapuściński’s last day as he walks the streets of Luanda looking for his Zopo Lady, that is, *his* city. We are shown scenes of the desert, the harbour, and the city centre, whose empty streets attest to the departure of a population. The contemplative voice narrates the context of the brutal history of Angola from the perspective of settler-colonialists who are being ousted out of the country. The only presence in the city is that of the voice; no human being is in sight. There is a personification of the heavy concrete buildings, testament to the remains of Portuguese settler-colonialism. The visual intensity on the concrete structures exudes a dystopian quality that indicates the disappointment of the revolutionary moment. This is what Angola has become – a ghost town, a desert-like place where life itself is not as it should be. The emptiness ‘represented’ in the video enables discussions about blackness and ontology in the post-colony. By removing the Portuguese settlers, what we are apparently left with is an unpopulated city, whose black bodies are perceived as not-constituted as ‘being’. The term ‘being’ is used here in the present continuous to connote the ongoing nature of being human.

In this chapter, I look at the intersections between black ontology, spectrality and theories of haunting, with a direct link to the video artwork, *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* by Kiluanji Kia Henda. Through Henda, I propose the notion of black spectrality in relation to Achille Mbembe, Sylvia Wynter, Avery Gordon and the Angolan revolution, and in so doing, look at

⁴³⁷ Henda.

the critical capacity of ghosts and haunting as metaphors for different forms of black socialisations and black in/hyper/visibilities. The spectralisation of blackness can be argued to exist in the process of what Orlando Patterson calls “social death”.⁴³⁸ Patterson’s social death, closely linked to Mbembe’s position, makes connections between blackness and ghostliness as the inability to decide whether one lives or dies. I ask, in what ways do ghosts and haunting communicate hidden forms of sociality that are otherwise not visible to us? I contemplate the ways in which the ghost is another way of referencing the social, and meditate upon ways in which what the social cannot contain in an empirical way, the ghost allows for us to see. Lastly, I meditate on the omnipresence of ghosts in everyday life, not as a haunting, but as a way of enduring multiple presences. I use the video *Concrete Affection*, as a case study to consider issues of the haunting capacity of colonial ghosts and the idea of an incomplete revolution that continuously seeks to be resolved through the process of haunting. The chapter asks, in what ways do the ghosts of colonialism remain in a place after the granting of independence? What influence does the aftermath of colonialism have on the socialisation of those that are left behind after a revolution? In order to explore these questions, it is necessary to give a brief account of the Angolan revolution, a moment that Henda returns to in his video.

Ryszard Kapuściński and The Angolan Revolution

In the mid 1970s, Angola joined several African countries in a new political space of colonial independence. Countries such as Ghana (1957), Congo (1960) and Guinea-Bissau (1973) had already gained their independence, while Mozambique (1975) and Zimbabwe (1980) were still in process. During the moment of Angola’s decolonial process, Portuguese settlers –

⁴³⁸ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

referred to as the *retornados*, meaning the returned, and referring to Portuguese colonialists who returned to Portugal – were given a short period of time in which to vacate Angola and return, presumably, to Portugal.⁴³⁹ The Portuguese had settled in Luanda in the 16th century, and were initially primarily interested in trade, including that of slaves. In the 1950s, a few Angolan-led organisations mobilised in the quest to rid the country of colonial victimisation; this led to the 1961 Angolan uprising.

From the 1961 uprising, the country became embroiled in thirteen years of conflict in what was known as the Portuguese Colonial War.⁴⁴⁰ Thousands of lives were lost, and Angolan infrastructure destroyed in a way that was to cripple Angola's economy to this day. In 1974 in Lisbon, Portuguese left-wing military forces overthrew the then conservative Estado Novo Portuguese regime, who upheld colonial rule and advocated control over their colonies. This military coup was instrumental in propelling the decolonial motives in Angola and enabled the nationalist Angolan organisations the ability to garner capital towards getting rid of Portuguese rule and moving closer to a post-colonial and free nation.⁴⁴¹ However, following the 1975 moment of independence, Angola was met with a civil war that saw three opposing Angolan-led political parties contest for rule over the country.

Well into the 1980s and 1990s, and finally 'ending' in 2002, the country confronted numerous accounts of "post-election catastrophe", among other forms of battle and conflict, where "the losing party went on the attack, besieging cities and blocking relief supplies".⁴⁴² It soon became evident that the expectation of an ideal post-independence country could not wholly escape the violent legacy that was brought about and left by colonial rule. Predictions

⁴³⁹ Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique*, 306.

⁴⁴⁰ Minter, 306.

⁴⁴¹ Minter, 109.

⁴⁴² Minter, 1.

of a better future that could be determined by the people of Angola were disrupted as the claim to power was violently sought out by the three parties. The tripartite conflict comprised the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto, the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) led by Holden Roberto, and, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) led by Jonas Savimbi. There were many years of combat, winning and losing ‘ownership’ over certain states, and leaving, in their wake, further death and destruction of Angolan lives and infrastructure. The war for independence in Angola (and in other former African Portuguese colonies Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, which are often read in tandem due to their guerrilla warfare similarities and their shared colonial ruler) is also remembered as the battleground for outside forces and an extension of the Cold War on foreign land.⁴⁴³ Cuba, the Soviet Union, South Africa, the United States of America, and their allies, became embroiled in conflict as Angola became one of the battlegrounds of the geopolitical Cold War’s numerous global proxy wars. Weapons, currency and soldiers (as many at 18 000 from Cuba) are reported to have been strategically injected into parts of Angola. Troops from these armies were sent to team up with either of the three parties (and indirectly against one other), and therefore ensuring the continuation of the war even after the depletion of Angolan military resources. The communist MPLA was supported by the Soviet Union (until its 1991 dissolution) and Cuba; the FNLA by the USA and president Mobuto Sese Seko’s Zaire; and UNITA was supported by the South African apartheid government’s Defence Force, who were, fundamentally, defending their economic investments in the south of Angola.

The war for Angolan independence, while originally an anti-colonial war (dated from the first Angolan uprising in 1961 to independence in 1975) against the Portuguese, surmounted its

⁴⁴³ Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique*; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976 - 1991*.

original quest into a civil war (from 1975 to 2002), as the ammunition and man-power from the USA, the USSR, and Cuba poured into Angolan hands, swaying the outcome of the war one way or another at varying intervals.⁴⁴⁴ Additionally, tribal conflicts became entangled with political agendas and added a different dimension to the nature of the war. The more populist U.N.I.T.A., led by Ovimbundu militant Jonas Savimbi, was an offshoot of the predominantly rural and largely Bakongo F.N.L.A following “personality and ethnic disagreement”.⁴⁴⁵ Support for the more urban MPLA lay predominantly with the Ambundu people, whose Marxist and intellectual agenda was critiqued as exclusionary from the interest of the general population.⁴⁴⁶

An account of the days leading up to the revolution are documented by Polish Press Agency’s journalist and correspondent Ryszard Kapuściński in his book *Another Day of Live* (1976). Deployed to Luanda to witness and report on the political transformations of the country, Kapuściński recounts the growing tension between the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA. His personal narrative sheds light on the everyday lived experience of a foreign, white male journalist living in a hotel among some of the few Portuguese settlers who were yet to depart the country. He narrates the challenges of running out of water and electricity, while eagerly awaiting news from his employer, and transmitting information back to them. Evident in his account is the uncertainty of the everyday, and the idea of living in fear, the rumours of what was happening in the war front (and elsewhere in the city and country) driving some of this fear. Kapuściński recounts that:

There was an apocalyptic mood, an expectation of destruction. Somebody brought word that they were going to bomb the city in the night. Somebody else had learned that in their

⁴⁴⁴ Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976 - 1991*.

⁴⁴⁵ Henriksen, “People’s War in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau,” 379.

⁴⁴⁶ Henriksen, 379.

quarters the blacks were sharpening knives and wanted to try them on Portuguese throats.⁴⁴⁷

There was clearly an awaiting of a rupture, when the course of the war could be changed: “An uprising was to explode at any moment”.⁴⁴⁸ However, the nature of that uprising was uncertain. The outcome of this living in precarity was that “[t]he city lived in an atmosphere of hysteria and trembled with dread”.⁴⁴⁹ Kapuściński must constantly make journalistic decisions about whether to climb into an armoured car that is making its way to a different city, to have first-hand experience of what is happening in the country. His last few days in Angola are eventful, and in the end, he must decide whether to stay in the country and witness the inauguration of the next independent government in November, or whether to leave having witnessed all he possibly could have, in the next plane or ship out of the country. In the end, he decided to leave. The first chapter of Kapuściński’s book, *We’re Closing Down the City*, becomes the premise of *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*.⁴⁵⁰

Living Outside of Time: Black Spectrality

*The Black Man is in effect the ghost of modernity.*⁴⁵¹

*The spectre of a storm is haunting the Western world. ... The Great Storm, the coming Black Revolution, is rolling like a tornado.*⁴⁵²

One of the most intriguing and mesmerising aspects of *Concrete Affection* is the complete lack of human presence in the streets of Luanda. Filmed in the otherwise busy city, Henda

⁴⁴⁷ Kapuściński, *Another Day of Life*, 6.

⁴⁴⁸ Kapuściński, 6.

⁴⁴⁹ Kapuściński, 6.

⁴⁵⁰ While Kapuściński’s entire book follows him on life threatening trips to towns and villages in the rest of the country, Henda borrows solely from the chapter that focuses on the tempestuous quest for ownership over the capital, Luanda, and arguably, by extension, Angola.

⁴⁵¹ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 129.

⁴⁵² Roland Snellings (askia Muhammad Toure) cited in Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, 60.

maintains this captivating representation of the absence of bodies throughout the entire video. The only presence of anything resembling a human is the voice that is not located within a particular body, but that nonetheless ‘walks’ the streets for the last time before leaving the city. The disembodied voice, which we know to be that of Kapuściński, confirms this absence by stating that “there is no one in the streets”.⁴⁵³ Throughout the video, the voice signals to the imminent departure of the settlers from Luanda, and is attentive to the imminent transference of power, infrastructure, and resources, once the departure has occurred. The voice, however, boldly states that while “[t]he streets are being handed over... there is no one to possess them”, thus alluding to the absence of people other than the settlers awaiting retreat – the people who are doing the handover are the settlers, and the people who would be taking over are black Angolans.⁴⁵⁴ What this suggests is that, the category of people is assignable only to the Portuguese settlers who are receding, and that in their absence, the black Angolans who would remain behind are not seen as constituting being. It is thus compelling to consider these suggestions in relation to the condition of blackness prior to the attainment of freedom and prior to the revolutionary moment. Through the representation of absence and invisibility of black people, Henda pressures us to contemplate the relationship between blackness and humanness in the wake of the pre-revolutionary moment.

In *Concrete Affection*, the human is clearly the “overrepresented” voice of Kapuściński, to borrow from Sylvia Wynter’s account of humanness being the overrepresented normative white man, and the Portuguese settlers who are leaving Angola.⁴⁵⁵ They are portrayed as occupying a space inside the human, and in their absence, a void exists. Conversely, black Angolans are presented as outside of the human. It is for these reasons that, when the

⁴⁵³ Henda, *Concrete Affection - Zopo Lady*.

⁴⁵⁴ Henda.

⁴⁵⁵ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.”

Portuguese settlers leave, no one, no other human, is seen to remain. This ‘underrepresentation’ of blackness and black people in *Concrete Affection* presents a kind of spectrality of blackness and the black condition during colonialism. Spectrality is here considered as that which was once alive but has since died and has since become a spook. To be a spectre also recalls a paradox of presence and absence, where one is absent as human, but is present as something else. History has shown us that, when the Portuguese left Angola, black Angolans certainly remained behind. History has also shown us that black Angolans were in fact present in the moment of the revolution. However, their physical absence in the video and their absence in the streets and interiors of Luanda is confusing. We know that they should be present, but their presence has been rendered absent, spectral, through their lack of physical representation. Blackness as spectral contributes to the many othering definitions – “the savage” or the “animal” – that black people have been given as a way of excluding them from the realm of humanism.⁴⁵⁶ I refer to the correlation between blackness and spectrality as black spectrality and argue that, in many ways, blackness has been forced to function within the limits of spectral existence. The introduction of the figure of the black spectre continues from Achille Mbembe’s assertion that the ways in which blackness within the African context has been socially and politically structured, there is a loss of normative humanness as we have come to understand it; the results of which is that black people have been relegated the status of the “living dead (ghosts)”.⁴⁵⁷ By virtue of the fact that black people are not afforded the same rights in a political system, and by virtue of the fact that their roles in those societies are often of subjugation, their status is that of less than human. Mbembe argues that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die”.⁴⁵⁸ Thus, an exercise in exploring power over another, such as in the case of the colonised assuming power over the colonised, is best

⁴⁵⁶ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 24.

⁴⁵⁷ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 132.

⁴⁵⁸ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 11.

exemplified in deciding, not only how the colonised must live in subjugation, but whether they can live at all. While the death purported by Mbembe is sometimes a physical death, what is at stake in the proposed notion of black spectrality is a metaphorical death, one where the physical body may technically be alive, but parts of the spectre's humanism is contested. In this way, while black Angolans physically remain after the departure of the Portuguese settlers, their status of metaphoric non-existence is argued. The black spectre, therefore, lives out a kind of "death-in-life", the idea that they may physically live but inside they are in fact dead.⁴⁵⁹ The colonies, such as pre-revolution Angola, take the form of "*dearth-worlds*, [which are] new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*".⁴⁶⁰ The black spectre is "kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity" and lives in a constant state of precarity and subjugation.⁴⁶¹

The metaphorical status of black spectrality is arguably achieved through what Orlando Patterson calls "social death".⁴⁶² Social death is the process by which the subjugated, whether it is the enslaved or the colonised, cease to have power.⁴⁶³ It is the process whereby the subjugated experience a complete shift in their conditions of living. According to Patterson, for an enslaved people, this process begins during the initial moment of enslavement, when they are being forced to leave behind their way of life and adopt a way of life characterised

⁴⁵⁹ Mbembe, 21.

⁴⁶⁰ Mbembe, 40.

⁴⁶¹ Mbembe, 21.

⁴⁶² Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

⁴⁶³ It is not without its risks to adopt Patterson's social death – with its direct link to slavery – in the context of Angola's settler colonialism, given Jared Sexton's cautioning that "the concept of social death cannot be generalized. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel". However, social death is precisely useful in reading the conceptual decisions made by Henda to relegate pre-revolutionary blackness the status of spectrality, one where black people are neither death nor alive, and where in most instances, they are perceived to be both. A key proponent of the notion of social death also lies predominantly within the context of slavery, not only that of black Africans and their forced migration to the Americas, but slavery in the broader sense that Patterson acknowledges it. For the purpose of this exercise, social death is not only considered in the context of enslavement, but also of settler colonialism. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," 21.

by exploitation and loss of power.⁴⁶⁴ This process is one of dehumanisation, where the enslaved has no control over whether they live or die, and how they live or die. Mbembe goes on to indicate that social death is an “expulsion from humanity altogether”.⁴⁶⁵ In the context of *Concrete Affection*, it is the shift of black Angolans being classified as human, to their being relegated the status of black spectrality. The concept of social death, and an ontological death that is predicated on sovereignty and total control, aids in our understanding of the forced ‘formation’ of the black spectre. Social death in the colony is best understood through Mbembe’s notion of “killing the enemy of the state” or, more aptly, “killing the enemy of the [colony]”, that is, black people.⁴⁶⁶ The use of the word ‘killing’ signals to the violence with which death is achieved, and makes explicit the fact that death was not reached through other means other than at the hands of someone or something else. This leads Mbembe to conclude that, being relegated the status of the living dead is not a choice, but rather an unjust and violent imposition by a controlling party.⁴⁶⁷ This ‘killing’ is also one not solely of the physical body for, in the colonies, there was a reliance on black bodies to carry out labour and advance the colony’s economy. As such, this metaphorical and psychological death ensures the survival of the body, but breaks and severely undermines and damages something significant in the victim. That something is arguably the essence that would relegate the victim full human status. As such, by virtue of the fact that the body remains, but the human essence has been severed, the victim becomes a victim of violent malevolent betrayal and forcibly assumes a ‘living dead’ status. Consequently, the victim, made to ‘live’ a condition between humanity and spectrality, undertakes “a marginal state of social death”.⁴⁶⁸ The exclusion of black bodies from the classification of human is what Patterson calls a “social negation” that refuses to accept and acknowledge blackness as forming part of society or

⁴⁶⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

⁴⁶⁵ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 21.

⁴⁶⁶ Mbembe, 19.

⁴⁶⁷ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 138.

⁴⁶⁸ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 48.

humanity.⁴⁶⁹ The conversation between a physical and ontological death is compelling in the context of the video. Henda signals to an ontological death of blackness prior to the revolutionary moment, while simultaneously removing the physicality of the black body from representation. Henda seems to be suggesting both a physical and ontological death and erasure experiences by black people.

The condition of black spectrality is an imposed condition, one devoid of freedom of choice. As Mbembe argues, “[o]ne does not enter into the ghostly realm out of curiosity or because one wants to. Ultimately, a tragedy, indeed a loss, is at the origin of everything”.⁴⁷⁰ The black spectre is therefore a product of a violent encounter. The ‘condition’ that ‘produces’ the black spectre in *Concrete Affection* begins in the 16th century, not with the arrival of the Portuguese colonialists, but with their systematic implementation of colonialism and a creation of a violent anti-black world. The blackness prior to that moment suddenly finds itself transforming to the new conditions imposed on it. In *Concrete Affection*, we witness that the process of spectralisation (of being relegated an anti-humanism, or inhumanism, thrown on the periphery of society) is incessant. It is indicated visually by the emptiness of the streets of Luanda, relegating the city a state of a graveyard where, in the absence of the colonialist, those that remain behind are ‘portrayed’, through their omission, as spectres.

The non-representation of blackness in *Concrete Affection* disables any possibility of what Sylvia Wynter calls the “new conceptions of the human”.⁴⁷¹ Wynter argues that “one cannot ‘unsettle’ the ‘coloniality of power’ without a redescription of the human outside the terms of

⁴⁶⁹ Patterson, 38.

⁴⁷⁰ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 138.

⁴⁷¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.”

our present descriptive state of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation”.⁴⁷² With this in mind, Henda compels us to ask whether, if we have different criteria by which humanness is measured, might black people be representable in the video. By virtue of the fact that “the continued production and reproduction of such a [normative] genre of being human” exists, it closes all potential to imagine it anew.⁴⁷³ The omission of black bodies in the video presupposes complete domination over the condition of blackness and over black life in the colony and fails to account for the unwritten and unacknowledged experiences of daily black experiences. As Christina Sharpe articulates, “even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected”.⁴⁷⁴ The lack of representation of black bodies seems reinforced in this living in subjugation and this living as inhuman, without aiming to tell an alternative history of blackness. By solely concentrating on the activities of the settlers and their preparation for departure, the experiences of black people are divorced from the revolution. In *Concrete Affection*, the condition of black spectrality through the erasure of black bodies is one where black Angolans have been refused formal recognition of their social and political status. As Patterson states about the social condition and status of slaves,

[w]hen we say that the slave was natally alienated and ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community, this does not mean that he or she did not experience or share informal social relations. A large number of works have demonstrated that slaves in both ancient and modern times had strong social ties among themselves. The important point, however, is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding.⁴⁷⁵

While Patterson is speaking specifically about slavery, it is productive to consider this in relation to the black spectre whose existence is seen outside of formal politics and normative

⁴⁷² Wynter, 268.

⁴⁷³ Wynter, 269.

⁴⁷⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 4.

⁴⁷⁵ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 6.

social structures. However, as Patterson evidences, invisibility in mainstream politics does not mean a complete lack of existence.

If blackness is given the status of spectrality, it can be assumed that it has the capacity to haunt a system that has constructed it through violent means. While the figure of the black spectre is made so as oppositional to humanly status through a classification as “the irrational/subrational Other” and exemplary of “the negation of the generic ‘normal humanness’, ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West”, it should be understood that the status of black spectrality is never merely accepted but is resisted.⁴⁷⁶ Since the black spectral condition is an imposed condition, there is constant resistance against it, made manifest in and through the process of haunting.

Haunting, therefore, forces some semblance of social and political change on the system that created the black spectre. If we are to imagine that the spectralisation process is a process of collective social and political subjugation (and death), then we can imagine the haunting capacity of spectres to function collectively in order to strive for the social change. The ghosts embodied within black spectrality are therefore not individual ghosts. They are collective, representative of a ghostliness that ‘affects’ a group of people, thus solidifying the ghostly condition on a grander and more systematic scale – that is, systematic racism. Ghosts do not have the ability to do that which the human is able to do and do not have the means and resources to exist in society according to the same rules as the non-ghost. The ghost therefore uses haunting as a means to be seen and heard, and as a call to be allowed the same means of existence as the non-ghost. Haunting is used as a strategy towards attaining freedom from the ghostliness or from the “ghost world”, and reappears anew in a world that is not

⁴⁷⁶ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument,” 266.

anti-black.⁴⁷⁷ Haunting becomes a way of grasping control over one's own life, and as a form of seeking power. This haunting has the capacity to instigate fear as the notion of the spectre – the human that was and no longer is, but still is in a different form – is frightening. This fright is felt by the “victim of ghostly terror”, the non-ghosts and oppressive systems that have paradoxically created the very conditions of existence for the black spectre.⁴⁷⁸

Avery Gordon asserts that “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 ... or when their oppressive nature is denied”.⁴⁷⁹ Colin Davis posits that ghosts are the deceased who have not been buried properly; they return to the world of the living to haunt us because the process of laying them to rest has not been followed.⁴⁸⁰ The failure to bury the dead properly unsettles their being present or not-present, existing or not-existing as they continually come back to haunt us until we bury them properly. Ghosts are feared in society, precisely because they are not alive and yet they are present. It is the merging of ontology and linear time that makes us fear the existence of ghosts. The haunting is itself a moment of temporal uncertainty as events that are meant to remain in the past force themselves to be revealed and dealt with in the present. Gordon further states that:

Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something

⁴⁷⁷ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 131–32.

⁴⁷⁸ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola.”

⁴⁷⁹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination*, xvi.

⁴⁸⁰ Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*.

else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.⁴⁸¹

The ‘return’ of the dead as ghosts questions our perception of death as final. The return of the dead indicates the impossibility of finality – while the living might die, they may also return in a different form(s), perhaps as inanimate objects that are suddenly animated and come alive. If objects come alive, then they threaten the distribution of power. The animation of the object, or of the other, threatens the imposed power imbalances of the world. This is predicated on the fear of the other, that through animation, the other holds the possibility change the power dynamic. Avery Gordon asserts, “[w]hat’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”.⁴⁸² Should the animation occur, then scenarios where there is a challenge of power relations are put into place and the grounds on which the numerous hierarchies exist begin to be destabilised.

The animation of the other is coupled with the fear that the other can change positions with the subject. If the object becomes animated, human-like, what does that mean for the subject, the only one who was previously accepted as human. It is for this reason that a representation of blackness is omitted from the revolutionary moment in the video. Blackness cannot be seen to possess the ability to become animated. Doing so would inadvertently disrupt the power relations of coloniser/colonised. This is a point of contention because what is being represented is in fact a revolutionary moment where the coloniser is leaving, and the colonised is taking over the system, albeit not as a coloniser. What this means is that, the fear that black spectres can overcome their condition, attain freedom, and occupy a place inside the human is actually underway. As such, black bodies that are undergoing the revolutionary moment should be represented as having shed their black spectral status, but they are in fact

⁴⁸¹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination*, xvi.

⁴⁸² Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination*.

not. This indicates the incessant nature of colonial systems, and attests to the fact that, the attainment of freedom does not always mean the end of oppression. It is worth noting that the other, through the animation, remains non-human, and merely takes on the characteristics of the human. The other appears human, but is never fully human, and as a result, the fear of the other is perpetuated by the fact that the object that should not be alive is suddenly alive in a manner that is unnatural. The black spectre is also this fear because, due to its non-humanness, its actions are unpredictable and they are prone to moments of unnatural rupture – you cannot control what they can (or may) do. They may lose control at any given time, so they are constantly in a possible moment of rupture. In *Concrete Affection*, the moment of rupture should have arrived, but it is not represented as rupturous. Instead, what we see are empty streets where there should be people roaming around, and what we hear is quiet where there should be noise.

The idea of silence where there should be noise, or invisibility where there should be visibility, alludes to an incompleteness of the revolutionary moment. Drawing on and adding to the discussion of Fanonism, David Marriott argues that to be in the process of a revolution is to be in “a paradoxical suspension of time or *tabula rasa* that is also a new beginning”.⁴⁸³ He continues, noting that the independence that would be brought about by a revolution is,

the time for a new humanity, the colonized whose time has come – and explicit claims to redemption or recovery are, one might suspect, no more than a further twist to this ‘narrative of liberation’. For there is nothing for which Fanonism has come to be so well known as the demand for a new sovereignty, nothing could be more Fanonian than the affirmation of the coming revolution whose proud claim is to redeem colonized humanity.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸³ Marriott, “Whither Fanon?,” 33.

⁴⁸⁴ Marriott, 33.

The revolutionary moment is therefore that which should be giving rise to a new humanity for black Angolans that are left behind. In the colonies, according to Mbembe, there is a complete collapse of the notion of “the ends of war”, or, for the purpose of the chapter, the attaining of freedom from colonial rule.⁴⁸⁵ What might it mean for the end of colonialism (a derivative of Mbembe’s “ends of war”) to not bring with it an ‘end’ as we would imagine it? The end of colonialism, fostered by the actions of a revolution, do not mean the end of inhumane treatment of black people in Angola. Instead, the revolution, like spectrality, functions under the characteristic of what Mbembe refers to as “incompletion”. Mbembe argues that ghosts function “according to the principle of incompletion”.⁴⁸⁶ The notion of incompletion ties in closely with the idea of the incomplete revolution that eradicates periodisation and traverses multiple temporalities. *Concrete Affection* offers a reading of the incompletion of the revolution, and the necessity to constantly return to that moment, anew, not necessarily to re-enact the event of the revolution, but to call on newer forms of a revolution, bearing in mind the events that occurred since the supposed revolution. The political climate of Angola, following the 1975 revolution, and the need for a reimagined revolution that stems from that 1975 moment, offer a great example of the never-ending necessity of the revolutionary moment. Through Henda’s incomplete revolution and inability to shed the conditions that created black spectrality, blackness is presented as a stagnant state of “not yet completely free”.⁴⁸⁷ Speaking about revolutions across the black diaspora, Kelley posits that, “all these movements crashed against the rocks, wrecked by various internal and external forces, but they left behind at least some kind of vision, however fragmented or incomplete, or what they wanted their world to look like”.⁴⁸⁸ As such, the incompleteness of the revolution should not be approached with disdain and utter disappointment. Instead, the

⁴⁸⁵ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 25.

⁴⁸⁶ Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola,” 145.

⁴⁸⁷ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, xi.

⁴⁸⁸ Kelley, 3–4.

revolution should be imagined in non-prescriptive and closed manners, and should include those moments of daily acts of resistance against the conditions imposed on blackness.

In addition to blackness's ability to haunt, Henda signals to the fact that it too can be haunted by the systems that create it. This is represented in the video through the colonial-style architecture that, even after the departure of the settlers, will remain. As the voice 'walks' the empty streets of Luanda, the lifelessness invited by the erasure of bodies is rivalled only by the grandeur of the colonial-style buildings. Henda makes a point to over-present the "huge concrete sculptures" that are left behind by the colonisers, and that, due to their lack of removability, will inadvertently be inherited by those that remain.⁴⁸⁹ The architecture of the city, which has been imbued with a humanly personification as the buildings become characters in the video's narrative, is representative of that which haunts blackness in the colony. The colonial architecture is a reminder of the violence and the unshakable legacy of colonialism. The eeriness with which Henda represents their imposing nature signals to the imposing and haunting nature of colonialism, even during the process of the attainment of freedom. In addition to the characterisation of the buildings, Henda introduces another non-human character in the video, that is, the city of Luanda. Luanda, which is the site of the decolonial process in the video, and by virtue of the fact that it is seen to 'house' spectres, is presented as a ghost town, an abandoned city that has been left in ruins. The city has been turned into a graveyard, one where history, memory and the metaphorical lives of blackness have been buried. The reconstruction of what is meant to be an exhilarating moment in history, when the end of colonialism and oppression are not only imminent, but have arrived, is uncomfortably presented as a forlorn moment of discomfort. If the end of oppression is pregnant with loss and melancholy, what hope is there for imagining a post-colonial time of a

⁴⁸⁹ Henda, *Concrete Affection - Zopo Lady*.

better existence? The melancholic emptiness in the video renders the revolutionary moment as dystopian.

Concrete Affection presents the notion that futurity stopped at a certain point and time became stagnant. In the video, time (or rather the concept of futurity) is stuck in 1975. This poses problem as it suggests that futurity stopped with the end of rule of white people. This indicates the deep-seated structure of colonialism and how it projected a futurity for itself. Any futurity that was imagined by black people is meant to be a future of no longer being colonised, but once that has been achieved, time is meant to stand still for them. As such, paradoxically, all the futures that were meant to arrive with a revolution were lost with that very revolution. In an ironic turn of events, then, a return to 1975 is a return to a moment that was filled with hope, where futurity was still a viable and appealing possibility.

Sonic Spectrality and the Amplification of the Voice-Over

In *Concrete Affection*, the voice-over speaks to the rhythm of the visuals and the continuous change from one scene to another. The time that the voice speaks in is in line with the time of the film montage. The break in speech, in between sentences or when breath is drawn, mimics the sudden cut from scene to scene. The visual and sonic moments of pausing are synchronous and the mood of the voice also corresponds to the speed of the visuals. The subtitles, that are meant to translate what the voice is saying, thus 'needing' to appear on screen at the same time that the voice utters the translated words, are also in synch with the visuals and the voice. Henda employs a 'strict' dedication to rhythm and time that is achieved through how the visuals and audio appear in the visual and sound mixers. Henda decides to aesthetically (visual and auditory) adhere to the synchronisation of image and sound in the

formalistic aspect of the video. The sound in the video favours the voice. While there are other sounds that make up the video's soundtrack, attention is paid to the voice that carries a key and central component in the film. The voice that is represented is that of Ryszard Kapuściński, the Polish Press Agency reporter who was sent to Angola to witness the revolution and to report back to Europe. The "aural re-presentation" of Kapuściński's voice is central to the iteration of how the Angolan revolution unfolds.⁴⁹⁰ Henda presents it in such a way that it carries all the meaning of that particular moment. This aural re-presentation begins melancholically with the assertion that "Everything is arid", and leads to a calm 'walk' through the streets of Luanda, then a scream, and later rests on an auditory resignation towards the end of the video.⁴⁹¹ The auditory journey signals the mood of the complex moment, from one of intrigue, to hope, to horror, and finally, upon boarding a ship out of Luanda, to one of a loss of hope.

The voice evokes an amalgamation of authority, sadness, and melancholy. Given the fact that an oppressive system is coming to an end, the melancholy evoked through the voice is confusing. Should the revolutionary moment not be accompanied by elation, which could be easily conjured through the voice's sonic materiality and the way in which it narrates the events of the revolution? However, upon close inspection, or close listening, we come to hear the fact that the words uttered are also not positive, but echo the melancholy of the nature of the voice. This becomes unsurprising when we come to learn that the voice is that of Kapuściński, whose forlorn voice echoes what we accept to be the ill feelings of the Portuguese settlers. The narrative of the revolutionary moment is not told from the perspective of the black Angolans who are undergoing a positive metamorphosis. As such, the sonic substance in the video does not reflect what we would expect to be their excitement

⁴⁹⁰ Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 276.

⁴⁹¹ Henda, *Concrete Affection - Zopo Lady*.

of the revolution in progress. Instead, the voices of black Angolans are silenced and omitted from the narration of the video. *Concrete Affection* thus illustrates that the ontology of blackness is not only undermined through the visual, or lack thereof. Blackness is not only denied visual materiality and substance, but also auditory materiality, or any kind of “sonic agency” to borrow from Brandon LaBelle.⁴⁹² Instead of representing blackness both visually and sonically, we are presented with an overrepresentation of a white man’s voice and an erasure of the voices of black people.

In *Concrete Affection*, “the voice itself” and “the words it carries” communicate the manners in which history has always been narrated and written, and the perspective that these histories are narrated from.⁴⁹³ The narration of history should always be considered to be a subjective account of the events, as different people experience the same thing differently. As such, it is curious that the revolution that black people are undergoing from an oppressive colonial government is not told from their perspective, but rather from the perspective of an outsider, that is, a reporter stationed in Angola to report on the accounts of the revolutionary moment. It is even more curious that Kapuściński is the narrator of the events given the scrutiny his work received and accusations of fictionalising accounts. Peter Englund reports how Kapuściński’s works were accused of “errors”, “overstatement”, “confabulations” and “a penchant for embellishing what he had seen and done”, and that his journalistic reporting was sometimes more the work of fiction than fact.⁴⁹⁴ He states how Kapuściński “didn’t believe in journalistic objectivity” and that “while at the front in Angola he sometimes participated in the fighting”.⁴⁹⁵ Furthermore, he was prone to “a distorting of reality” by mixing in fictional

⁴⁹² LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*.

⁴⁹³ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 1.

⁴⁹⁴ Englund, “Fact and Fiction,” np.

⁴⁹⁵ Englund, np.

moments in his narratives, thus distorting the entirety of his reportages.⁴⁹⁶ Luke Harding, citing Kapuściński's biographer Artur Domoslawski, states how the reporter "was often inaccurate with details, claiming to have witnessed events he was not present at. On other occasions, Kapuściński invented images to suit his story, departing from reality in the interests of a superior aesthetic truth".⁴⁹⁷ If we consider the accusations of fictionalising revolutionary moments, it is a wonder why Kapuściński becomes the voice of truth and fact of the events of the revolution. There is a certain overreliance on history as communicated by and through whiteness, even when those accounts are widely known to be slightly or dramatically falsified.

The overreliance of whiteness appears in the video through the amplification of Kapuściński's voice. It is with this in mind that we might begin to think *Concrete Affection* through the notion of the sonic amplification (of whiteness) and the sonic erasure (of blackness). The amplification of Kapuściński's voice as the sole and main narrator of this crucial moment in the history of Angola recalls Marie Thompson's notion of "white aurality".⁴⁹⁸ White aurality can be considered as "that through which and with which the world unfolds".⁴⁹⁹ White aurality is that which dictates what is "sound-itself", and the idea of "sound-itself" is always tied to either the white body or whiteness in general.⁵⁰⁰ White aurality is a term used to critique and reveal the bias of Christoph Cox's notion of "sonic ontology", where sound is meant to be considered without its sociality, but considered as (sonic) material in and of itself.⁵⁰¹ Thompson considers the position from which (white) sound has the luxury of divorcing the social from its make-up, where the primary concern is with "the nature of sound-itself as it exists 'beyond' the realm of representation, signification

⁴⁹⁶ Englund, np.

⁴⁹⁷ Harding, "Poland's Ace Reporter Ryszard Kapuściński Accused of Fiction-Writing," np.

⁴⁹⁸ Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 266.

⁴⁹⁹ Thompson borrowing from Nikki Sullivan's notion of "white optics". Thompson, 274.

⁵⁰⁰ Thompson, 278.

⁵⁰¹ Cox, "Beyond Signification and Representation: Toward a Sonic Materialism."

and culture”, and argues that other kinds of sounds – sounds linked to blackness, for instance – are always implicated within the social.⁵⁰²

It is therefore interesting to consider Kapuściński’s voice through the notion of sonic ontology, which, recalling Wynter, can be read as the overrepresentation or the overamplification of white sound, of white voice, or what we might call sonic whiteness.⁵⁰³ The overrepresentation of sonic whiteness as the sole and main representation of reality, that is white aurality, is certainly at play in the narration of the accounts of the Angolan revolution, told from a white Polish reporter who was prone to embellishments of reality. Here, white aurality should be considered as the amplification of whiteness, and what is clearly evident in *Concrete Affection* is the amplification of Kapuściński’s voice through its representation as the only voice. It should be noted that the amplification of the voice is not represented as a voluble experience. Kapuściński does not shout as he narrates the events of the revolution. He speaks calmly, which is disrupted momentarily by a sudden scream, but he maintains a calm composure and quiet demeanour throughout the video. The amplification of his voice lies in the fact that, aside from some infrequent background sounds, it is the only voice that we hear. It is with this in mind that an analysis of the use of voice in the video should be read not only through the sonic materiality of Kapuściński’s voice, but also through its sonic sociality. What does Kapuściński’s voice communicate about the social and political moment that it is situated in? A viable conclusion is the dominance of the white male voice in the narration of histories, and the authority it brings with it.⁵⁰⁴ The authoritative nature of Kapuściński’s voice does not leave room for questions. It states what it states with authority, and presents it as the sole version of truth. Where, then, are the voices of those that remain

⁵⁰² Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” 271.

⁵⁰³ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.”

⁵⁰⁴ Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” 272.

behind, or the people who are undergoing a revolution on a different side to that of the narrator? Why is the narrative expressed as and through loss, of a city, or power, or the right to subjugate? While Kapuściński is not a Portuguese settler, and is therefore exempt from the role of coloniser, his ability to move through the city the way he is able to, and his ability to leave Angola, is synonymous with that of the settlers who also have somewhere else to go. The auditory perspective and position of Kapuściński is enabled by the fact that he is not a Portuguese settler, but rather a supposedly objective reporter. But, his proximity to the settlers through his whiteness make him removed from the experiences of black Angolans who are fighting against the system for the revolution.

The sonic sociality at play in the video becomes evident through the amplification of the white voice-over, which signals to the “racialized erasures and exclusions from the realm of ontology”, where the overrepresented white man’s voice is inside the human and blackness is outside the human.⁵⁰⁵ Thompson helps us think whiteness as “a protocol that produces and orders spatial-temporal relations, and enhances and limits a body’s affective capacities in relation to its surroundings”.⁵⁰⁶ She draws attention to sound and its entanglements with “histories of whiteness and coloniality”.⁵⁰⁷ For Thompson, sound is racialised and should always be heard as such. The relationship between the sound in the video and the overrepresentation of the white man’s voice-over is therefore doubly racialized and signals to even deeper rooted issues of whiteness and coloniality as that which is at the forefront of humanity. Henda chooses not to locate the voice in a body, but rather relies on the voice to be a carrier of meaning, as well as the meaning itself. The voice-over exudes an element of omnipresence and undisputed authority. Its failure to be located in spatiality through a physical body concretises its perceived omnipresence as it is the voice not of somewhere (of a

⁵⁰⁵ Thompson, 268.

⁵⁰⁶ Thompson, 269.

⁵⁰⁷ Thompson, 270.

specific body), but a voice of everywhere. To recall Chion's notion of the "voice that seeks a body", in *Concrete Affection*, the white man's voice does not need to seek a body in order to assert its authority and superiority.⁵⁰⁸ It exists independent of a body, and still carries with it an assumed humanness without the comfort of visibility. Kapuściński's voice is therefore imbued with universality – to recall Thompson's account of the assumed universality of white aurality – and what it communicates should be taken as truth. Kapuściński's amplified voice therefore signals to "the underlying and unspoken whiteness of the ontological", where whiteness or the white voice bears with it an assumed universality.⁵⁰⁹

The dis-location of Kapuściński's voice from a body emphasises lack of locatedness within a particular space. This adds to the illusion of the voice's perceived universality through its omnipresence. It is important to understand how the attribution of voice to different genders, different races, and even different classes affect our reception of that which is being said. In *The Acoustic Mirror* Kaja Silverman states that the employment of the male or female voice in cinema and the relationship to the bodies who speak it differs.⁵¹⁰ She asserts that the male voice has presence and does not need to be located within a body, and that the female voice always has to be associated with the female body. The male voice in film has the authority to be concrete in itself while the female voice always has to have a host. Michel Chion shares some of these sentiments, arguing that the male voice is concrete and contained, masculine and in control, while the female voice is infinite, not confined to any specificity and therefore having less authority.⁵¹¹ The universality and authority of the voice-over is, however, disrupted when we consider the widely known confabulation that Kapuściński brought to his reports, thus indirectly arguing against the authority of the voice that is known to have taken

⁵⁰⁸ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 125.

⁵⁰⁹ Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 267.

⁵¹⁰ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories of Representation and Difference*.

⁵¹¹ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

liberties with the truth. The universalisation of Kapuściński's voice recalls Sara Ahmed's notion of "whiteness-as-orientation", where the actions and being of whiteness is seen as the proper state of being and that which should orientate everyone else.⁵¹² In *Concrete Affection*, whiteness-as-orientation, or white voice as orientation, takes on a literal meaning as we follow the voice of a white man spatially through the streets of Angola. The white male voice also orientates us through history as it outlines to us how we should be experiencing the events of the revolution. *Concrete Affection* moves audibly between the streets of Luanda. The auditory movement is not effortless, despite its calm demeanour, but bears with it a degree of angst, despair and discomfort. The discomfort lies in the absence of other voices in the telling of this revolutionary moment. The despair and angst comes from Kapuściński's realisation that this is his last day in this city as it is soon going to change hands – from Portuguese colonialists, to black Angolans. The angst and despair should not be read solely as that of Kapuściński, but rather as that of the settlers who are being forced out of a place they never imagined they would have to let go of.

There is an eeriness to the calmness of Kapuściński's voice that runs through most of the video. As stated earlier, in as much as this should be a moment of elation for the blackness that is undergoing the process of escaping the clutches of colonialism, some form of sonic rupture, whether of elation, celebration or despair, is expected. We expect the moment to be expressed through loudness. What does it mean for it to be so calm? For whom is the scene sonically calm? Where is the noise that should accompany such a moment, such an 'end' to centuries of violence against violence? For Thompson, "white aurality pertains to the present-absence of a universalizing yet situated orientation that, in modestly 'hearing with', amplified certain thing and muffles others".⁵¹³ As argued above, in *Concrete Affection*, what is

⁵¹² Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 163.

⁵¹³ Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," 274.

amplified is the white male voice, and what is being muffled are the voices of the black people undergoing the revolution. However, considering the critique that should be made against white aurality as “sound-itself” and its dominance over any other kind of sounds, then can we begin to consider the possibility of hearing the muffled black voices through their silence and sonic absence through what Thompson would call hearing otherwise? Put differently, just because the voices of black voices are not represented or heard in the video does not mean that they are not there, nor that they cannot be heard. Thompson’s notion of hearing otherwise helps us hear blackness through its silence as communicating the events of the revolution.⁵¹⁴ We are, after all, able to discern the problematic social conditions of placing whiteness at the top of a revolution undergone by black people in the silence of blackness. This sonic sociality discerned through the silence echoes Tina Campt’s call to listen to images, which ultimately argues that there is something to be heard in spaces that are not seen to emit sound.⁵¹⁵ Similarly, in *Concrete Affection*, we are compelled to listen to the silence of blackness and hear what that silence communicates to us. Hearing blackness through the silence is therefore an exercise in actively hearing otherwise.

Conclusion

The Spectre: Concrete Affection and Ghosts as Ontological and Temporal Vision explored the relationship between blackness, humanism and spectrality. This was done through Kiluanji Kia Henda’s video *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*, which references the eve of the Angolan revolution of 1975. The accounts of this revolutionary moment are communicated through a Polish Press Agency reporter, Ryszard Kapuściński, who was stationed in Angola to report on the events of that anticipatory moment. The chapter explored what it meant for

⁵¹⁴ Thompson, 278.

⁵¹⁵ Campt, *Listening to Images*.

the revolution to be narrated by Kapuściński, and what that communicated about the black Angolans who were undergoing the revolution. The sonic and visual representation of blackness (of lack thereof) was discussed in relation to the sonic and visual spectrality of blackness. The introduction of the figure of the black spectre was used to argue different ontologies for black Africans to the one that is solely linked to normative humanness. Black spectralities uses ghosts as metaphors that consider black ontologies within the political in what is considered the post-colony and how blackness functions on the periphery of humanness within post-colonial socialisation. Through Wynter we have come to see a prioritising of race in the determination of humanness, and consider how blackness functions outside the limits of humanness.

The absence of black bodies in the streets of Luanda were considered as an erasure of blackness from the narration of their own histories and their own memories. The revolution, which should have brought with it elation for blackness, instead overrepresents whiteness through the voice of Kapuściński. This overrepresentation of whiteness is discussed as a form of sonic amplification, which in the video is not amplified volubly, but rather as through the absence of other voices that could be present. The absence of black bodies is made that much more prominent by the amplification of a white man's voice. Even though bodies of any race are not represented in the film, there is an overt representation of whiteness through the voice that is known to be that of the white male reporter Ryszard Kapuściński. This overrepresentation of whiteness though the voice is contrasted by the absence of sonic representation of the blackness. This absence further relegates blackness a state of invisibility, or inaudibility, thus adding to what can be referred to as the sonic spectrality of blackness. Kapuściński's voice signifies a kind of sonic trace, or a trace of ontology that is

highly predicated on the sonic. The absence of not only black bodies, which have the potential of being seen and of being touched, is intensified by the absence of black voices.

Chapter 4: The Sorcerer: *Phyllis* – Communing through Sonic Black Feminist Spiritualities

Introduction

Filmmaker and visual artist Zina Saro-Wiwa is a pioneer of representing Africa and Africanness through the moving image. From her time as a presenter and producer at the BBC in London in the early 2000s, she has been particularly concerned with addressing and rectifying the stereotypical and damaging images associated with black women and the African continent. As a visual practitioner, Saro-Wiwa understands the power of images to construct a particular stereotype of a particular people, oftentimes as a way of furthering their subjugation. Black womanhood, and blackness in general, have fallen prey to the damaging nature of their image-based oppression.

Saro-Wiwa's 2010 short film and video artwork, *Phyllis*, exemplifies her corrective ethos and endeavour. Shot on location in Lagos, Nigeria, the video looks to complicate the problematic representation of women in Nigerian Nollywood films as loud, as witches, and as always on the margins of society. *Phyllis* is a semi-narrativised 15 minutes 37 second video that tells a tale of a single woman, Phyllis, who lives alone in a flat in Lagos. Borrowing from and in dialogue with Nollywood-esque aesthetic tropes – such as sound effects, videographic temporalities (or the constructing and experience of time) – we are taken on a journey in the life of Phyllis. The blue walls of the room in which Phyllis sits are covered with posters of African American women singers, including a portrait of Dione Warwick. Other decorations on the wall are plastic decorative trinkets, a framed photograph of a white Jesus, and posters of numerous Nollywood films. Temporality and pace play a particular role in this short film,

with scenes often punctuated with Phyllis's waking or falling asleep, or falling into a trance-like state. Phyllis wakes up in the morning, opens her eyes to the sound of heartbeat. Her eyes, rolled back, are revealed to be white, zombie-like and deprived of the black pupils that would make her recognisable as human. In this early scene and the audience's first engagement with Phyllis, she reaches for a black and blue wig which she puts on. Once on her head, she takes on a recognisable human form, in the first instance, her dark pupils are suddenly visible. She sits on the bed, hands intertwined and ready for prayer. The moment Phyllis puts on the wig and opens her eyes and her pupils become visible, there is a change in the non-diegetic background sound – from the heartbeat to Dione Warwick singing the 1956 song, *What the World Needs Now is Love*. Phyllis goes about her everyday life, which includes obsessively watching Nollywood films on her television, carefully timed around the scenes of women and men crying in melodramatic candour. The figure of God makes an incessant presence as the characters continually pray to him. Emphasis is placed on the mundane and on the slowness of Phyllis's day, with the wigs punctuating the timbre of her activities. The repetition of the act of putting on the wigs changes everything and nothing.

Like clockwork, Phyllis takes off the wig and her eyes turn zombie-like again at the accompaniment of a distinct heartbeat – whom the heartbeat belongs to is not clear nor explained. She finds another wig and the action is accompanied by another change in music and we hear the beginning of what could be a classical song with the piano slowly and smoothly sounding to the panning of the room. This sound, is, however, quickly disrupted by yet another eerie, screeching non-diegetic sound, causing tumultuous feelings, an anticipation of eminent danger suggested. Phyllis then takes off the second wig she is wearing. The slow heartbeat sound returns, and overlaps with another iteration of her whitened-out eyes. The transition between two modes of being are not only facilitated by the wearing of the wigs, but

also by a change in sound – in music and in voice. At this point, we hear the Yoruba⁵¹⁶ song *Ilu Re O* by Lagbaja, a Nigerian juju musician whose songs are characterised by the prominence of African drums.⁵¹⁷ The cut from one mode of being is made evident by the cut in sound, sometimes through a juxtaposed transition, other times through an abrupt, jostling shift.

After a meal – the Nigerian dish, egusi – while watching a Nollywood film, and after obsessively stroking the Nollywood posters on her wall, Phyllis chooses to wear a pink wig. This time, instead of staying in her apartment, we see her pack up some of the wigs and leave. As Phyllis exits the building, descending a staircase from her flat, she is stopped by a man who appears to make unwanted advances; he cajoles and touches her, despite her obvious objection and discomfort. She escapes his grip. The following scene shows her outside, walking slowly, deliberately, with the wigs on a large tray, evidently to sell them. A woman shows interest and approaches Phyllis to try on a wig. Phyllis puts a wig on the woman and the woman seems to go into a trance, staring into space, while Phyllis ritualistically shakes her head, and for the first time, Phyllis’s eyes turn white and the heartbeat is audible while she is wearing the wig. Something malevolent and otherworldly transfers between her and the woman in the street. The woman appears possessed, gives Phyllis money and turns around to walk away as Phyllis takes back the wig. Back in her apartment, Phyllis takes off the pink wig – eyes turning white again, and puts on a brown wig. She obsessively strokes the wig. “I am not alone”, a gospel song, plays at the dénouement of the film, as Phyllis smiles, with what looks like blood running from her eyes as the video ends.

⁵¹⁶ Yoruba is one of the three common languages and tribes in Nigeria, together with Igbo and Hausa.

⁵¹⁷ Juju music, which shall be discussed below, is a form of Nigerian music that draws from voodoo and representations of the supernatural.

The chapter engages *Phyllis* as an example of a filmmaking form coined by Saro-Wiwa called alt-Nollywood. Through alt-Nollywood, Saro-Wiwa engages with the Nollywood film industry and its contentious representation of women. In order to outline the necessity and nature of alt-Nollywood and to unpack how it is activated in *Phyllis*, it will be necessary to contextualise the ad hoc Nollywood industry. I read Nollywood as circumstantial to its socio-political and economic condition. I also read Nollywood as radical, despite the problems pointed out by Saro-Wiwa, due to its insistent, improvisatory and tangential nature. This will help us arrive at the compulsion for Saro-Wiwa's alt-Nollywood and her video *Phyllis* as an illustration of the generative quality of the form. I move through an outline of Nollywood, and swiftly into the world of Saro-Wiwa's alt-Nollywood as I work on the proposition that while alt-Nollywood potentiates a new way of representing black womanhood, it also requires critique for some of the aesthetic characteristic of Nollywood it aims to undo.

In the rest of the chapter, I mobilise the two main criticisms of Nollywood – that is, the use of loud sounds and the representation of black women as witches – to indicate ways in which alt-Nollywood contributes to emancipatory representations of black womanhood. I read the intersections between sound, race and gender through Jennifer Lynn Stoever and Alexander Weheliye.⁵¹⁸ I consider the use of 'poor', loud and 'disruptive' sound in Nollywood films and unpack how Saro-Wiwa mobilises transitional and transcendental sound to advocate for positive representations of black women. Through Jennifer Lynn Stover, I contemplate how the "racialization of both sound and listening" has always posed a problem for blackness, and in this case, black womanhood, and look to alternative "auditory imaginings of blackness" and black womanhood.⁵¹⁹ The work of Alexander Weheliye is useful, in the proposal of the call and response nature of the phonograph and its capacity to formulate communities across

⁵¹⁸ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*; Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

⁵¹⁹ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, 2; 1.

sparse geographical spaces will be likened to the call and response nature of Phyllis's wigs and wig-wearing activity.⁵²⁰ It is through the call and response nature of the wig that I will arrive at the proposition of the wig as spiritual and transcendental technology.

I ask, what are the possibilities opened up by embracing the loudness of Nollywood while simultaneously staying with the alt-Nollywood strategy of dismantling problematic representations of black women in moving image? Here, I will briefly motion towards the work of black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins to make a point about the black feminist activist nature of alt-Nollywood.⁵²¹ The relationship between witches, the representation of wigs in Nollywood, as well as black feminist activism in the moving image leads me to a discussion of continental black women's spiritual practices through the notion of wigs as devices that record and disseminate black women's identities and ontologies. The work of Kameela Martin on black women's spiritual practices is instructive here, and I read her in relation to Collin's notion of "safe spaces" for black women and their images.⁵²² Since Saro-Wiwa alludes to the complexity of understanding Phyllis as a witch and therefore an *other* to humanity, I suggest a further contemplation (and complication) of Phyllis's use of wigs, as well as Saro-Wiwa's use of sound, as gateways to a discussion about black womanhood and the performance of humanism. The chapter therefore uses *Phyllis* to map out how black women's sounds and spiritualities can be mobilised to contemplate positive black women's existences. Phyllis helps us arrive at this safe space for black women's representation to exist through moving image.

⁵²⁰ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

⁵²¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*.

⁵²² Collins.

Nollywood: Towards an Autonomous Film Industry

Zina Saro-Wiwa's video *Phyllis* was conceptualised out of a necessity to confront the damaging and controlling representation of black women in Nigeria's Nollywood film industry. As a filmmaker and television producer with a long-spanning career in the United Kingdom since the early 2000s, Saro-Wiwa was accustomed to seeing problematic representation of Africa and Africanness from a western context. By the time of her UK television tenure, the decade-old Nollywood industry, while performing a crucial intervention in the production of African cinema(s) was, simultaneously revealing troublesome representational tropes, particularly with regard to gender roles and conventions. In order to situate the work within the framework of 'alt-Nollywood', of which Saro-Wiwa's offerings are a part, it is necessary to contextualise the form in the broader Nollywood film industry. Alt-Nollywood is a form that Saro-Wiwa introduced to simultaneously question and reverse some of the stylistic and conceptual decisions made by Nollywood filmmakers. As such, it is necessary to give a brief account of Nollywood – which can be situated in the history of African cinema outlined in the Framework Chapter – what it stood for, and what makes it a necessary point of departure and contention.

1950s and 1960s post-independence West Africa ushered in the possibility of a true black cinema.⁵²³ True black African cinema – produced by Africans for Africans and commonly referred to as the glorious years – was meant to undo stereotypical depictions of Africa and Africans by western filmmakers. The cinematic tropes sought to undo narrative and aesthetic registers that were used to justify and reinforce colonial rule over the continent. In Nigeria, the glorious years were preceded by the Nigerian Civil War – the Biafran War – between

⁵²³ Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*; Murphy, David; Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors*; Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*.

1967 and 1970, which devastated Nigeria's economy.⁵²⁴ With the weakening of the Naira, Nigerian filmmakers were no longer able to afford the celluloid films they had been producing seminal films such as Ola Balogun's *Amadi* (1975).⁵²⁵ Nigerian cinema was subsequently forced to operate within this strained economic and political climate, which contributed to the film industry's untimely demise. Furthermore, the civil war left in its wake an increase in urban crime, which disturbed cinema-going culture as locals feared falling victim to criminal misconduct.⁵²⁶ Following the civil war, cinema-going culture, customarily reserved for nightlife, was threatened, as violence boomed in the country. For safety reasons, audiences preferred to stay at home, which increased the reliance on television screens for the consumption of television dramas, live television and films.⁵²⁷ These factors produced a cinematic culture of direct-to-video filmic production commonly referred to as Nollywood and led to Kenneth Nnebue's 1992 film *Living in Bondage*, which is heralded by many as the first Nollywood video film.⁵²⁸

The untimely demise of the glorious years therefore necessitated a new mode of film production in Nigeria, which a few businessmen with no prior affiliation to cinematic production capitalised on. As the third largest film industry in the world, in terms of the number of films produced – after Bollywood and Hollywood – the Nollywood industry is a billion-dollar business that produces an exponential number of video films in a short period

⁵²⁴ James, "The Nigerian Civil War, 1967 - 1970: A Revolution?," 120.

⁵²⁵ Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*.

⁵²⁶ Ayakoroma, 2014; 20

⁵²⁷ One prominent television drama that aired from 1986 to 1990 was environmental and political activist, writer and producer Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Basi and Company*, which Zina Saro-Wiwa (his daughter) samples in her production of *Phyllis*. Additionally, according to Barclay Ayakoroma, the live television practice of this time was characterised by 'disordered' techniques and production that make some of Nollywood's approaches unsurprising. He notes how, when watching live television, "[m]any unpleasant things happen – power failure, loss of sound, unsteady or violent camera movements like sudden whip pans, uncontrolled movements across the cameras, studio gossips and wrong cues inadvertently taken on air, to mention a few. The result, most times, could be best described as 'transmission of moments of confusion'". Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*, 37; 41.

⁵²⁸ Ayakoroma, 48.

of time. Some Nollywood films can take only a few days to make.⁵²⁹ Nollywood was therefore “a brainchild of ‘business circumstance’” that “capitalised on the ease of the video format for productions”.⁵³⁰ Since funds for post-production were no longer available, the whole film industry either had to transform its mode of production and distribution in order to survive, or await demise. These circumstances inspired the development of new modes of production, distribution and spectatorship, which Nollywood exemplifies. Additionally, Grace Kumwenda notes how cinema-going culture was up until that point reserved primarily for men, but with the deterioration of cinema spaces and the introduction of viewing films within the comfort of one’s home, spectators began to include women and children.⁵³¹

Nollywood films – discussed here in relation to medium and industry – portrayed local stories by depicting the everyday lives of Nigerians. Viewers could identify themselves in the images they were seeing and the sounds they were hearing. Fashioning different genres, from gangster films, to Hallelujah films – Christian-orientated films that are sometimes produced by the church – and juju films – occult films that often deal with witchcraft and the supernatural – spectators of Nollywood encountered storylines that resembled events in their daily lives.⁵³² In an interesting turn of events, in Nollywood, “what the Western world sees on screen as reflections of the cultural heritage of Nigeria are no more warped impressions hurriedly presented by foreigners, but what is projected by Nigerians”.⁵³³ This is one of the primary reasons that Nollywood is considered a radical mode of filmmaking, advanced by its experimental and improvisatory nature that cultivated a form that adheres solely to its own rules. In Nollywood, we see a different approach to image making, and a different treatment of sound and temporality. This composition of images, sound, texture, mise-en-scène,

⁵²⁹ Statistics as of 2011.

⁵³⁰ Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*, 29; 46.

⁵³¹ Kumwenda, “The Portrayal of Witchcraft, Occults and Magic in Popular Nigerian Video Films,” 11.

⁵³² Saro-Wiwa, 2014; np.

⁵³³ Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*, 20.

encouraged audiences to engage with the material in an active manner, wilfully sieving through common passive audio-visual encounters. Zina Saro-Wiwa notes how the industry is

what should have been on television, but was forced out into the open market to fend for itself, and it has mutated into this hybrid B-movie/soap operatic form where the films are often 3-4 hours long, hyperbolic, melodramatic but made for TV. They are highly uncinematic in visual scope.⁵³⁴

Due to its unique and radical visual, sonic and temporal language and rhythm, Nollywood storylines are often perceived as not being coherent, not having a “beginning, climax and resolution”.⁵³⁵ Instead, the films are largely recognised to adhere to abnormative temporal structures. They are not necessarily non-narrativised, nor are the events in the films necessarily non-chronological, but there might be a disjuncture to the forms of narrative and chronology that we are accustomed to. The abnormality of Nollywood film lies somewhere in its improvisatory component.⁵³⁶ The nature of the films is in such a way that storyboarding and pre-production in the customary sense are not obeyed. As Saro-Wiwa observes,

[a] lot of scripts are improvised anyway in Nollywood, so they have the basic outlines, and you’re shooting on the street, and you’re shooting at home, and you’re dealing with an environment that’s very chaotic. You know, you run out of time, you’re making scripts on the spot, and so there’s a lot of improvisation which actually gives the Nollywood films a kind of terrifying and terrible energy, and you’re sort of watching it like you’re watching an argument on the street and thinking, ‘What’s gonna happen next?’⁵³⁷

As an industry, Nollywood has been the object of unrelenting critique. The critiques can be divided into two categories, that is, the socio-political and economic nature of the industry, and the aesthetic (technical, visual, sonic) components of the films. The former includes

⁵³⁴ Saro-Wiwa, “Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria’s Nollywood Cinema,” np.

⁵³⁵ Kumwenda, “The Portrayal of Witchcraft, Occults and Magic in Popular Nigerian Video Films,” 5.

⁵³⁶ A critique of the improvisatory nature of Nollywood (including early Nollywood attempts) abound. In describing director Solomon Eze’s pioneering of video film productions in the 1980s, Ayakoroma (49) disclaims his attempts as “merely improvised scenarios”.

⁵³⁷ Saro-Wiwa, “Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria’s Nollywood Cinema,” np.

critiques of the representation of women – a contention shared by Saro-Wiwa – the lack of rigorous political commentary, and a misrepresentation of Nigeria and Nigerians as common, unsophisticated and obsessed with witchcraft.⁵³⁸ Nollywood has also been criticised for its solely profit-oriented model, which oftentimes undermines the desire for ‘accurately’ and ‘appropriately’ composed and crafted artistic products. The disapproval in Nollywood is also motivated by fear of the representation of popular and non-elite forms of Africanness as the sole (mis)representation of Africa to a Western audience – the result of this is that Africa might forever be perceived as backwards.⁵³⁹ Nollywood is also criticised for its storylines, which are often seen to perpetuate the idea of a backward continent in need of modern progress and transformation. The representations of the slowness of the rural areas and the immorality (crime, prostitution, loose women) of urban areas are cases in point. A further contention is the ubiquitous representation of supernatural storylines, where juju, voodoo and witchcraft are prominent. The juju genre is popular amongst Nollywood spectators, despite constant criticism of the representation of the occult. Ademola James (former head of the National Film and Video Censors Board) in a text on how to properly deliver Nigerian film, critiques Nollywood juju subject matter as not advancing the countrywide nationalistic reclaiming of the representation of proper Nigerian-ness.⁵⁴⁰ The supernatural, which I will later link to African-based spiritual practices, is therefore perceived to perpetuate negative imagery of Nigeria and Africa, thus undoing the recuperative work of the directors of yesteryear.

The over-representation of juju is perceived to be one of the main class issues in Nollywood. Juju films (and Nollywood in general) are supposedly consumed by uneducated people of the

⁵³⁸ John McCall (94) states that “Critics often lament that Nollywood fetishizes wealth and violence, emphasizes glamour over substance, and reproduces oppressive female stereotypes”.

⁵³⁹ Okome, 94.

⁵⁴⁰ Cited in Okome, “Nollywood and Its Critics,” 28.

lower class who believe in the supernatural. It is falsely contended that the middle to upper class would know better than to believe in matters of the occult. Other subject matter or genres of Nollywood, including gangster films and rags-to-riches or get-rich storylines are also perceived to appeal to the lower class that are looking for ways to overcome their precarious conditions. However, some, including Zina Saro-Wiwa and John McCall argue that people of all classes tend to consume Nollywood films. According to Saro-Wiwa, “[n]o matter how educated or sophisticated you think you are, certain kinds of people find themselves very seduced by these films, and I am certainly one of those people”.⁵⁴¹ Echoing this sentiment, McCall argues that the industry “engages the common villager as well as the socially privileged”.⁵⁴² The class criticism of Nollywood lies less in the audiences that it attracts, and more in the separation between the “elite” artform of the celluloid of yesteryear, and the supposed “non-elite” medium of video film. Celluloid of the glorious years is perceived as the more sophisticated, thought-through and technologically advanced of the two, with its directors (often trained in the West) conceptualising their films in line with ‘global standards’. The ‘anything goes’ mentality of video film, including untrained actors, actresses, directors, producers and distributors is that which relegates it a position of underdeveloped and non-intellectual popular culture for the masses.

This brings me to the second major critique of Nollywood, that is the aesthetic composition of the films. According to Grace Kumwenda, “Nigerian video films are known for their lack of depth in perspective, unmotivated camera movements and unsynchronised sound”.⁵⁴³

They are known for their “poor technical quality”, which results in poor visual and sound

⁵⁴¹ Saro-Wiwa, “Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria’s Nollywood Cinema,” np.

⁵⁴² P. 94. It is for this reason – its diasporic reach, as well as its ability to appeal to people of different social makeups – that McCall argues for the pan-Africanist nature of Nollywood. For McCall, the global reach of and engagement with Nollywood video films begins to achieve the pan-Africanism that early Negritude advocates – including Kwame Nkrumah – intended but failed to archive in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁵⁴³ Pg. 4.

tracks.⁵⁴⁴ Emeka Emelobe sees Nollywood as making “use of narrative styles that are often erratic, acting largely over exaggerated and low quality pictures mostly blended with un-rhythmic audios”.⁵⁴⁵ It is, however, evident that this supposed shortcoming in Nollywood aesthetics arises only when measured against either Western films, or films produced on the continent under the control of European cultural institutions. Director Ola Balogun, whose films are celebrated as part of the glorious years, denounces Nollywood as

childishly conceived, amateurishly written, and thoroughly predictable within three or four minutes of the commencement of the action. The acting is mostly of the *market-woman variety*, and generally consists of untutored actors gesticulating and shouting at each other at the top of their voices”.⁵⁴⁶

Nollywood is vilified for its “showy special effects” whose aesthetics resemble that of underdeveloped early cinema and not the more advanced aesthetics of contemporary global film production.⁵⁴⁷ What this means is that the equipment used for computer generated imagery do not translate very smoothly in post-production. It is, however, accepted that ‘perfecting’ the believability of the imagery and sound, while it may be a priority, is prohibited by lack of ‘sufficient’ recording and editing infrastructure and facilities. It is for this reason that Charles Novia, a Nollywood filmmaker, defends the practice, arguing that, “Nollywood is doing the best that it can in the worst of economic and technological situations”.⁵⁴⁸

Further to criticisms of non-realistic ‘sub-standard’ visuals, the use of sound in the industry is perceived to be lacking. In their co-written essay, “Perception of Sound: A Study of Selected

⁵⁴⁴ Kumwenda, 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Cited in Ajiwe, Uchechukwu C.; Chukwu-Okoronkwo, “Perception of Sound: A Study of Selected Nollywood Video Films,” 49.

⁵⁴⁶ Balogun cited in Okome, 33, emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁷ McCall, 94.

⁵⁴⁸ Cited in Okome, 33.

Nollywood Films”, Uchechukwu C. Ajiwe and Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo are heavily critical of sound in Nollywood, alluding to its incidental and not thoroughly conceptualised nature.⁵⁴⁹ Some of this is true, as Saro-Wiwa notes that oftentimes directors are filming on location in noisy parts of Lagos (such as the market-place), and these sounds are later included in the film without the intervention of necessary sound edits.⁵⁵⁰ Ajiwe and Chukwu-Okoronkwo’s critique is that films’ storylines should be as close to representations of reality as possible, and improper special effects and unsynchronised sounds that do not adhere to the rules and codes of reality are not acceptable in the filmic genre. Their critique is not only of the ‘bad’ quality of the sound itself, but also on the (lack of) conceptualisation of the sounds used – sound is not necessarily employed symbolically to drive a particular narrative structure, and also not necessarily for aesthetic reasons, but rather as undeveloped afterthought. Nollywood films can therefore be set apart through their different sonic and temporal makeups, which are sadly seen as non-generative and lacking in value. However, this chapter wants to take into account some of the following questions to suggest an alternative imagination for and about Nollywood, such as: Is there a possibility of seeing this loudness and this slowness a different way, and contemplating them as modes of inadvertent refusals as African video filmmakers are putting forward different incentives for the consumption of the moving image? What else is at stake in this mode of filmmaking when the language of communication and analysis is not bound up within colonial dualities and stereotypical subscriptions? In other words, what else can be discerned from the loudness and slowness of Nollywood when it is not considered within the parameters of colonial capture and western comparisons? In 2010, Saro-Wiwa invented the form alt-Nollywood to assist in tackling some of these questions.

⁵⁴⁹ Ajiwe, Uchechukwu C.; Chukwu-Okoronkwo, “Perception of Sound: A Study of Selected Nollywood Video Films.”

⁵⁵⁰ Saro-Wiwa, personal communication, 2018.

Saro-Wiwa's "alt-Nollywood"

Alt-Nollywood is a filmic form aimed at facilitating the debate about Nollywood's conceptual and aesthetic rigour. Invented by Saro-Wiwa in 2010, it is a mode through which the scepticism as well as radicality of Nollywood's sonic and visual transgressions can be deliberated.⁵⁵¹ Using film as a discursive medium, alt-Nollywood encompasses the ambivalence of admiring Nollywood's generative improvisatory aesthetic, while simultaneously purporting its potential for advancement. It fundamentally acknowledges the significant contribution the industry has had on the development of African cinema, but aims to recuperate everything that is 'faulty' with the medium, such as 'incoherent' storylines, slow tempos, and loud noises.

Alt-Nollywood for Saro-Wiwa is "Nollywood eating itself".⁵⁵² This suggests a self-reflexivity on the part of the industry and its producers, and allows a process whereby the criticism against Nollywood can be contended with and rectified. The "self-eating" of Nollywood suggests that it is the industry's producers and consumers who would be involved in the process of its radical transformation. The radical transformation would come in the form of retaining the generative improprieties of the medium (which for some might mean retaining the loud sounds, or inconsistently edited visuals), whilst severing any damaging components. Alt-Nollywood is therefore a form where Nollywood's representation of women, length of the films (sometimes as long as 4 hours) and the depiction of the common lives of Nigerians – or rather the depiction of all Nigerian life as common – can be revised.

Saro-Wiwa continues:

⁵⁵¹ Saro-Wiwa's attempts at introducing this new sub-genre has largely gone unnoticed. The term was coined in 2010, and its failure to launch as a worthy filmic genre, in praxis and in theory, attests to the volatility of black feminist creative practices in the public imagination. Its dearth indicates the necessity to work through, with and against propositions made by black women cultural producers as a means to arrive at a positive black women social sphere.

⁵⁵² Saro-Wiwa, "Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria's Nollywood Cinema," np.

So, for me, I'm not going to throw away the wig idea. Let's use the wig idea, it's interesting, but let's use it differently. Let's use the really crap special effects that we have.⁵⁵³

Alt-Nollywood might therefore encompass some of the distorted uses of loud sounds in Nollywood films, but they ought to be intentional, conceptual, and driving the narrative in a premeditated way. If a scene is filmed in the marketplace with loud sounds in the background, it should be intended to make a commentary on Lagos's soundscape. The sound should not be included in the film because no alternative was available, or because the director needed to release the film in a few days and did not have enough time for adequate post-production, thus jeopardising the integrity of the film. Alt-Nollywood is also seen to be a quest for a representation of the socially improved upon Nigeria and Nigerian-ness. In other words, the representation of the common lives of Nigerians, while it ought to be represented in film in order to facilitate socially transformative debate, should be done in a nuanced way that does not seem to accept the social order of things. It is with these critiques in mind, as well as the unavoidable adoration of some aspects of Nollywood that Saro-Wiwa conceptualised alt-Nollywood through "quick experiments that use Nollywood to subvert Nollywood".⁵⁵⁴

In addition to the reimagined use of sound and visuals, at the forefront of alt-Nollywood is an activist drive to dissolve the damaging imagery of black women in African moving image. This activism is easily locatable in the works of black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, and her advocacy for eradicating the "controlling images of Black womanhood".⁵⁵⁵ The controlling images that Collins speaks about are the "mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women" assigned to the stereotypical representation of

⁵⁵³ Saro-Wiwa, np.

⁵⁵⁴ Saro-Wiwa, np.

⁵⁵⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 99.

African-American woman.⁵⁵⁶ Saro-Wiwa's contested controlling imagery of African black womanhood comes in the form of the figure of the witch or sorcerer in Nollywood. Alt-Nollywood is therefore a proposition for a different representation of women in the films. If the films represent women as witches, it should be done in such a way that it comments on the unnecessary and gratuitous vilification of particular kinds of women (such as single women, those with mental disabilities, those without a family, those with male-dominated careers, and older women) in Nigerian society as opposed to reinforcing the stereotype of their othering. *Phyllis* and alt-Nollywood unravel our assumptions of what continental black womanhood is meant to be.

In order to exemplify the artistry of alt-Nollywood, Saro-Wiwa produced the video artwork *Phyllis* to indicate the form that a better Nollywood could take, inscribing those potentialities into the video. The film is intended to be prototypical of the improved use of the visual and sonic aesthetics of Nollywood, borrowing from the form, locating itself within it, while simultaneously critiquing it and its supposed shortcomings. One such way that Saro-Wiwa signals to alt-Nollywood in *Phyllis* is through her alternative use of sound, eliminating the loudness of Nigerian video films and opting instead for a silent film. She states that

Phyllis is certainly a silent movie — because I ... wanted to challenge this idea that Nollywood films have to be voluble. And sometimes there is so much noise, so much rubbish being talked, that I just think, 'Can we just do something that's silent?' and "Let's see if we can express Nigerian-ness through silence somehow".⁵⁵⁷

Unfortunately, alt-Nollywood sometimes reads like artworld petit-bourgeois annotation on a popular cultural form. While alt-Nollywood is not the overtly critical and dismissive commentary that Okoome opposes in *Nollywood and its Critics* – for in alt-Nollywood, there

⁵⁵⁶ Collins, 99.

⁵⁵⁷ Saro-Wiwa, "Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria's Nollywood Cinema," np.

is still an embracing of the genre – it nonetheless proliferates the perceived embarrassing aesthetic deficiency of the genre. It perceives Nollywood as that which, while it possesses potential as an ally of a sensitive representation of blackness in moving image, needs radical conceptual and aesthetic improvement. I, on the other hand, acknowledge the non-rhythmic, non-synchronous element of Nollywood sound, and argue for its subversive, radical sensibility due to its experimental and improvisatory nature. Whether this is the result of circumstance (filming in a loud street, filming with ‘outdated’ non-professionalised sound devices) and not aesthetic intention, it still demands a different kind of listening exercise through its disruptive sonic disposition. The representation of distorted sound in Nollywood helps undermine the normative ways in which we have been conditioned to hear sounds. Nollywood sound, therefore, is radical because of its refusal to adhere to the oft-anti-black rules of the world.

In an interesting turn of events, my argument against alt-Nollywood, similarly to Saro-Wiwa’s critique of Nollywood, is not without its ambiguity. I too see a kind of radicality and potentiality in alt-Nollywood, and think that what can be improved upon is the language with which alt-Nollywood critiques Nollywood. While Saro-Wiwa states that in alt-Nollywood (as in the case of *Phyllis*), she retains the “really crappy side effects” of Nollywood, the sonic and visual effects in the video are controlled, deliberate, and in fact *not* crappy. The ‘non-crappy’ and polished sound, or lack thereof, however, holds an intricacy that opens up a larger discussion about the representation of black women and blackness in general. What is admirable about alt-Nollywood and *Phyllis* is the black feminist activist nature of the form and its attempt at restoring positive imagery of black womanhood. It is undeniable that, in an industry (Nollywood and other global cinemas) dominated by an insistent colonial grip, and by men, the radicality of Saro-Wiwa’s conception of filmmaking that is sensitive to the

imagery of black women is timely. I am thus interested in exploiting the complex conversation that alt-Nollywood fosters about gender stereotypes and its attempt at undoing the use of controlling imagery while paying homage to Nollywood. I want to think through alt-Nollywood's use of sound and how that can help us reimagine and reconfigure gender stereotypes, and how a discussion of African black womanhood can link us back to the discussion of blackness on the continent by looking at the intersections of gender, humanism and race. More excitedly is the discussion of the relationship between black womanhood and their spiritual practices (through the figure of the witch) that Nollywood potentiates.

Sonic Archives and the Hyper-Audibility of Silence

Phyllis emerged through Burt Bucharach's and Hal David's 1965 pop song *What the World Needs Now is Love*, sung by Dionne Warwick.⁵⁵⁸ Upon arriving in Nigeria to shoot the video, Saro-Wiwa was compelled to repeatedly listen to the song, and from this sonic encounter, the writing of *Phyllis* emerged. The song appears in the video in the scenes where Phyllis goes about her daily routine, including eating and watching Nollywood films. It plays for an extended period of time, working as a soundtrack to this aspect of Phyllis's life. I want to pay close attention to Saro-Wiwa's use of song and sound in the video, and contemplate these uses through her proclamation that "*Phyllis* is certainly a silent movie".⁵⁵⁹ I am interested in how Saro-Wiwa uses sound as a kind of technology with which Phyllis transitions between multiple states of being. I will think these ideas alongside the supposed shortcomings of the loudness of Nollywood.

⁵⁵⁸ Saro-Wiwa, personal communication, 2018.

⁵⁵⁹ Saro-Wiwa, "Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria's Nollywood Cinema," np.

Phyllis is abstracted, mostly through sound, through the lack of diegetic voice, the distancing effect of slowed down music and sounds, and through the choice of music. Saro-Wiwa uses an archive of diasporic recorded sounds – including the songs by Warwick and Lagbaja – to drive the narrative of the video. Another form of sonic archive that she uses is the ‘voices’ and sounds of women (oftentimes crying) in Nollywood films as is evident in the scene where Phyllis watches Nollywood films. Saro-Wiwa has carefully selected scenes to show us moments in which the women on screen are shouting, crying dramatically, or simply weeping silently. This archive of the sounds of Nollywood are however silenced by Saro-Wiwa – we simply see what we should be hearing as the Warwick song plays over the muted sounds. Saro-Wiwa insists on including those scenes that would be characterised as loud in the film, however, she refuses to reproduce the sound. We merely act as eye-witnesses to what we imagine to be the screams of the women on screen. But, by virtue of the fact that we know what Nollywood sound sounds like, we still hear the inaudible sounds of the women even in their silence. This makes us question what it means for black women’s silences to be heard and for black women to be hyper-audible even when their sound is inaudible. Saro-Wiwa does not reproduce the sounds and screams of the black women on screen as a way of not perpetuating the absurdity of the representation of black women. The visual components of the films, and our previous knowledge of the dramatisation of black womanhood on screen means we are aware of the kinds of sounds that we should be hearing. However, by refusing to make the sounds audible and refusing to reproduce those sounds of dramatic black womanhood that Saro-Wiwa deems problematic, she pits her silence of alt-Nollywood against the loudness of Nollywood. In other words, she is ‘showing’ (more aptly, announcing to) us what should not be done. By removing the voices of the women and merely showing their gestural dramatism, she adds an element of absurdity to the scenes – this is what these women look like when they are shouting at the top of their voices. This is the ridiculousness

with which Nollywood represents black women and she compels us to turn a deaf ear to the sounds of wailing, screaming and altogether loud black women.

In *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Jennifer Lynn Stover discussed the heavily rooted meanings assigned to sound and volume.⁵⁶⁰ She reminds us that the emission, hearing or listening to sound is never neutral, but is embedded in a number of pre-conceived intersectional assumptions. When we hear sounds, we immediately assign gendered and racialised meaning to what we are hearing. Volume – including silence (lack of volume) and loudness – form part of those preconceived assumptions. Stover declares that loudness has been a problem for black people in the U.S.⁵⁶¹ Their loudness in public spaces has often led to either their incarceration or their murder at the hands of the police. As such, blackness that is loud is a threat to a particular kind of accepted North American socialisation. She goes on to argue that silence “offers black people no guarantee from state and police violence” as it can be perceived as antagonistic and subversive.⁵⁶² Despite the obviously American context of her thesis, it is still interesting and generative to think the use of loud sounds in Nollywood and silence in alt-Nollywood through the gendered and racialised lens that Stover alerts us to.⁵⁶³

In the context of Nollywood, the volume of sounds that emits from the body is both racialised and closely linked to gender and class. As is evident in the reception of Nollywood films, the volume of women poses a problem of representation, bringing to the fore questions of the accepted proper behaviour of black femininity. Loud women are automatically seen to be in the margins of society, while less voluble women are seen to adhere to an accepted form of

⁵⁶⁰ Stover, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*.

⁵⁶¹ Stover.

⁵⁶² Stover, 3.

⁵⁶³ Stover, 3.

black femininity – black women are therefore governed and policed through sonic restrictions or “sonic protocols”, to borrow from Stoever.⁵⁶⁴ In the critiques of sound in Nollywood, representing women through loud sounds and voices is seen as an indicator of their inferiority and subjugation; similarly, to be a woman who consumes such voluble representations attests to the viewer’s inferiority. The history of equating loudness to race and gender has led to the labelling of “women of color’s expressions of loudness as hostile, immature, angry, less intelligent, and/or divisive”.⁵⁶⁵ It is worth considering whether, in a world where loudness is a marker of faultiness, there might be potential to conceive of it as a form of resistance – whether erring on the side of higher decibels, as opposed to using volume sparingly, could be seen as a means of subversion, of denouncing all that is undesirable to dominant structures.

As stated above, the distorting of sound in Nollywood is oftentimes due to a lack of access to more expensive editing equipment that might lessen the loudness of the volumes and the distortion of the sounds heard. Due to ‘inadequate’ infrastructure, audiences hear a distorted version of the sonic representation. The distorted sounds are compelling in that the distortion or abstraction of ‘real’ oral and aural sounds are a result of circumstance, and not an intended abstraction. The loudness is the consequence of the accidental deafening sounds of the periphery. Voices are distorted due to a lack of balancing sound recording and playback technologies that would make the sounds recognisable as human. The abstracted and distorted sounds to the spectator offers a kind of disruption of the expected sound structure. This sonic disruption is oftentimes not welcomed. It is loud and out of tune. It is completely out of place and does not correspond to the visual events on screen, that is, it is not synchronised. The distortion has become part of the sonic colloquialism of contemporary video films.

⁵⁶⁴ Stoever, 24.

⁵⁶⁵ Stoever, 23.

In *Phyllis*, however, Saro-Wiwa offers a compelling type of sonic distortion and disruption through her purposeful use of silence. By providing us the reverse of the expected Nollywood sonic structure, she disrupts our expectation of loudness and distortion and abstraction. She provides a different kind of abstraction by locating Nollywood sounds in the terrain of absence – the absence of noise and of voice. She instead inserts these seemingly non-incidentalsounds, at the centre of which is the sound of Phyllis’s silence. Silence, absence (of certain sounds), and a tuned down volume is at the centre of sonic alt-Nollywood. As such, following the parade of the problematics of Nollywood’s representation of black women and black womanhood, Saro-Wiwa then uses the rest of the video to gesture to some alternative options of the portrayal of black womanhood that might help produce a positive black woman world. The conclusion that Saro-Wiwa wants us to draw is twofold: that the use of sound in Nollywood adds to the perception of black women as a threat in society, and as inferior– as such, the only viable option is to mute it. Secondly, that the use of sound in alt-Nollywood is recuperative to that damaged and damaging perception. Moving forward, alt-Nollywood’s silent treatment of sound is a healthy alternative. The silence in *Phyllis* becomes exemplary of what Daphne Brooks calls “Afro-sonic Feminist Praxis” or what I call sonic alt-Nollywood, a mode that has been potentiated through the black feminist aspect of alt-Nollywood.⁵⁶⁶

In addition to the silencing of the loudness of women in Nollywood films, Saro-Wiwa offers further consideration of the generative quality of silence. This manifests primarily through Phyllis’s choice or inability to speak throughout the entire video. At first ‘glance’, Phyllis’s silence in her own home is disquieting. While Saro-Wiwa aims to create a platform for the

⁵⁶⁶ Brooks, “Afro-Sonic Feminist Praxis.”

emancipation of black women's images, the immediate association of Phyllis's lack of voice, when considered in relation of the silencing of black women throughout history, strips away an immediate association with notions of her freedom. However, the generative nature of silence reveals itself when considered in relation to Gabeeba Baderoon's notion of "preferred silence".⁵⁶⁷ Additionally, Tina Campt also sees potential in self-imposed silences and sees their progressive capacity. Campt states that

[q]uiet is a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful... For blacks in diaspora, both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal.⁵⁶⁸

Following from Baderoon and Campt, I read Phyllis's silence as an act of refusal. Phyllis's silence, while unsettling, also provides an alternative viewpoint. In a world where one's identity is determined not only by one's physical appearance, but also by the way one sounds – "accents, dialects, 'slang' and extraverbal utterances" – Phyllis's refusal to speak (if one allows it to be a refusal and not an inability to speak) is a refusal of gendered and racial classification on the 'sonic lines'.⁵⁶⁹ Her lack of speech throughout the entire video prohibits the spectator, as well as the other characters in the narrative, to assign a predetermined identity to her. Through her silence, she remains neither loud nor quiet, as the absence of voice in Phyllis removes some form of sonic identification. Her silence, however, leads one to wonder if she in fact is opening herself up to listening, and if so, to whom is she listening – and who does she wish to hear. Located in a long history of gendered listening practices – women are meant to be quiet and not speak back, they are meant to listen in order to prove obedience – Phyllis' silence in the scene where she leaves her apartment and encounters a man in the stairwell incites anxiety and potentially frustration in the viewer. The man

⁵⁶⁷ Baderoon, "'This Is Our Speech': Voice, Body and Poetic Form in Recent South African Writing," 214.

⁵⁶⁸ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 4.

⁵⁶⁹ Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, 11.

‘speaks’ to her – which is visually illustrated through the silent-film style subtitling: “Where are you going?!” The textual use of the exclamation mark after the question mark signals to the aggression with which he asks the question, and while the question is not necessarily shouted out loud, it is loud with antagonism and hostility. Phyllis signals, through physical gestures, that his actions (physically blocking the stairway so she cannot pass) and his words are a source of discomfort. She, however, does not speak – she does not answer his question, and she does not offer a vocal proclamation of her discomfort. The man soon shrugs his shoulder, moving aside to let Phyllis pass, while fashioning a seemingly victorious smile on his face. Phyllis refused to speak to him and refuses to let him hear her voice, her pleas for safe passage, and revelations of her destination. While this refusal to explain herself might at first seem inconsequential, her silence in fact diminishes the duration of the uncomfortable encounter with the man. By refusing to speak back to him, she arguably claims back some control over the situation by silently refusing to engage with him in any way.

The Wig as Recording Device: The Activist Nature of Black Women’s Spiritual Praxis

[S]pirituality as a strategy of resistance is hidden in plain sight.⁵⁷⁰

In the scene where Phyllis goes out into the street, and ‘sells’ a brown wig to another woman, she proceeds to drain her customer’s essence into the wig through the guise of a sale. The exchange of the wig and money is not exclusively of this world. It is situated in a spiritual realm where identities are transposed onto objects and can later be downloaded on human vessels. We are later offered a glimpse into what happens to these transposed essences when Phyllis puts on a blue wig and we hear the voice of a woman praying. It is clear that the

⁵⁷⁰ Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism,” 2011, 109.

woman who wore it before had been engaged in prayer some time prior to Phyllis absorbing her essence. This becomes Phyllis's praying wig. Since Phyllis does not (or cannot) speak, the voice that is heard is not emanating from her body. It instead emanates from the technology of the wig. According to Alexander Weheliye, the introduction of the phonograph opened up newer modes of creating collectivity for the African-American community.⁵⁷¹ By producing a piece of equipment that could record black sound and disseminate it to a larger group of people through the technology of the phonograph, more people in different geographical (and temporal) spaces could listen to the music and engage in a vast spatio-temporal call and response. In so doing, the forms of community-building that were potentiated by communing with and through black sound and music could be extended to a wider audience and across different times (and generations). As such, the call and response nature that was enabled by the recording and playback sound technology of the phonograph opened up different ways of communing with one another.

I want to explore a few ideas, that is, Nollywood's juju genre and its representation of women as witches (culminated with the fear of the representation of African spirituality as a damaging image of contemporary Africanness to a western audience), and a contemplation of that through black women's spiritual practices. I want to think about these issues through Phyllis's praying wig and imagine the wig, like the phonograph, as a kind of recording device that facilitates and potentiates communion across vast geographies and times. The wig's technological component exists in the realm of the spiritual, and I want to consider what political activist actions we can discern from reading this spiritual space as a safe space for black womanhood to exist and plot ways of existing freely in anti-black women worlds. This contextualisation leads us to a reading of black women's spiritual practices as a mode of

⁵⁷¹ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 20.

subversion. I am especially interested in determining the role collective spiritual practices potentiate for the creation of black feminist communities – and I see Phyllis’ use of wigs (that have been worn by other black women before her) as a technology that helps her transcend the normative perception of black womanhood and its implied conditions. Furthermore, I am interested in whether collective black feminist communities (created through spiritual practices) make possible a new representation and conception of continental black womanhood. Saro-Wiwa’s work is indicative of the contemporary practice of looking back to African spiritualities and its ethereality as emancipatory practices. Saro-Wiwa in particular unpacks, through moving image, how this ethereal African spirituality is physically inscribed on black women’s bodies.

The representation of women as witches is a common feature in the Nollywood juju or voodoo genre. Grace Kumwenda notes how,

[i]n the Voodoo (Horror) genre and the Hallelujah (Evangelistic) genre, images and themes of witchcraft, the supernatural, ritual killing and religion are dealt with to a great extent. In the Hallelujah genre, witchcraft and ritual killings are treated as an evil to society. The battle between evil and good is, therefore, manifest between witchcraft and Christianity. On the other hand, the voodoo genre does not portray a black and white representation of witchcraft as being evil... it also explores the portrayal of Christian dualism in which Christianity appears to be a symbol of hope, restoration, and morality whilst the occultist activities and other traditional African beliefs and religions appear to be a symbol of evil, death and negativity.⁵⁷²

Ukadike contends that the “Nigerian video film industry has provided a medium in which Africans generally, and Nigerians especially, can face their fears of witchcraft (among other things) and have a visual perception of something that is rarely seen in their lives but rather

⁵⁷² Kumwenda, “The Portrayal of Witchcraft, Occults and Magic in Popular Nigerian Video Films,” 20–22.

talked about, feared and discussed”.⁵⁷³ Grace Kumwenda states that “[o]ne of the most overused themes in the witchcraft narratives is the portrayal of the image of women as witches”.⁵⁷⁴ It is therefore not only the image of a backward Nigeria that is perceived to be problematic with the juju film, but also the image of non-socially conformist black femininity.

The figure of the witch in Nollywood leads to a discussion about African spiritualities and the ways in which black and women’s spiritual practices have been represented and in what vein they are perceived. The figure of the witch is pertinent to understanding how black female bodies are written and represented in African moving image and how those cultural productions are meant to reinforce the perception of the image of the difficult black woman. The connection I am making, through *Phyllis*, between black feminist thought and spirituality is not new. Many theorists, including Nadesha Gayle, Njoki Nathani Wane, Kameela Martin and in fact Patricia Hill Collins, have alluded to the activist nature of black women’s spiritual practices.⁵⁷⁵ The decision to centre black women’s spiritual practices as political acts is therefore in line with Patricia Hill Collins’s strategy of rethinking black women’s activism and acknowledging their unrecognized quotidian practices of resistance.⁵⁷⁶ Gayle believes in the “role of spirituality as a tool for Black women’s agency” and that “spirituality continues to be at the root of Black women’s resistance that has transferred from one generation to the next”.⁵⁷⁷ Through *Phyllis*, we witness “how Black women’s spirituality has been used as a form of resistance and activism” through what Wane calls the “spiritual strength” and bell hooks calls “the spiritual power” of black women or black people in general that has helped

⁵⁷³ Cited in Kumwenda, 47.

⁵⁷⁴ Kumwenda, 55.

⁵⁷⁵ Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism,” 2011; Martin, *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in African American Cinema*; Wane, “African Women and Spirituality: Connections Between Thought and Education”; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*.

⁵⁷⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 101.

⁵⁷⁷ Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism,” 2011, 107–8.

them face adversity, from slavery, to colonialism, to contemporary challenges such as neo-liberalism.⁵⁷⁸

Spirituality, according to Gayle,

is having connection to a higher being that is larger than things within our grasp; connections to nature, community, and inner strengths that enables people to cope and navigate within their environment. Spirituality is a state of human relationship with the eternal force which transcends all material conditions and limitations. Spirituality is a connection which exists within all humans and other living beings.⁵⁷⁹

In this sense, spirituality can be seen as a kind of cosmic network, where other forms of communications are potentiated. Phyllis capitalises on this cosmic network to commune with other black women and enact the politics of refusing a normatively assigned black womanhood. It is therefore in the context of the spiritual realm where black women are able to gather and plot against their anti-black woman existences on earth. The spiritual realm, functioning as a safe space for activist work, is exemplary of what shape positive black womanhood can take. Safe spaces, according to Collins, are “social spaces where Black women speak freely”.⁵⁸⁰ These spaces also “form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other” and where “Black women could freely examine issues that concerned us”.⁵⁸¹ Safe spaces allow for the enactment of activism against systems designed to subjugate black women. It becomes clear that any work done in the spiritual realm, therefore, has real and measurable consequences in the ‘real world’.⁵⁸² While some black women spiritual activist

⁵⁷⁸ Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism”; Wane, “African Women and Spirituality: Connections Between Thought and Education”; hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.

⁵⁷⁹ Gayle cited in Gayle, “Black Women’s Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism,” 2011, 111.

⁵⁸⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 100.

⁵⁸¹ Collins, 101.

⁵⁸² Spirituality as historically been a problem for oppressive structures such as imperialism, as Kameela Martin indicates in the case of Haiti. Haiti, following its ambitious and successful resistance against the French in 1791, was stigmatised in the west mainly through their spiritual practice. It was also in fact a spiritual ceremony that motivated the Haitian’s to rebel against their colonisers. There is therefore a kind of socio-political power inherent in spiritual practices – and spiritual practices, while a form of black informal politics, should be seen inside the realm of formal politics due to its real-life

work is intended to help black women cope with the oppressive situations and conditions they are forced into, as Gayle argues, in Phyllis, something else is at play.⁵⁸³ Here we see spirituality not only being used as a coping mechanism, but used as a tool and space where these oppressive situations and conditions are imagined to be eradicated. It is in this way that Phyllis signals to the activist nature of black women's spiritual praxis where these praxes become calls to action as well as modes of and spaces for radical resistance.

Saro-Wiwa draws attention to two things. Firstly, the representation of black women's spiritual practices in moving image. Secondly, she highlights the importance of black women's spiritual and communal practices that are linked to healing in the quest for positive black womanhood. Onokome Okome has argued that in Nollywood, "the diabolical image of the mother as the witch of the family is part of the larger construct of the place of women in contemporary Nigeria".⁵⁸⁴ It is also part of the larger construct of the place of black women's spiritual practices. This has led Martin to ask: "Why are women who engage in spirit work assumed to be purveyors of evil?"⁵⁸⁵ This is deeply rooted in the criminalisation and bastardisation of black women's spiritual practices.⁵⁸⁶ It is therefore pertinent to acknowledge the safe spaces of the collective spiritual realm as "institutional sites" for the enactment of black feminist activism.⁵⁸⁷ Phyllis and her wig-wearing technology are "acts of

consequences.

⁵⁸³ Gayle, "Black Women's Experiences of Spirituality as a Form of Resistance and Activism," 2011, 114.

⁵⁸⁴ Cited in Kumwenda, 55.

⁵⁸⁵ Martin, *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in African American Cinema*.

⁵⁸⁶ This has led to what I perceive to be a rather precarious and volatile situation for black women in the diaspora, such as Saro-Wiwa who grew up in the United Kingdom and is now residing in the United States. The ability to practice African spiritual practices is limited due to the fear of being deemed other. In order to fully assimilate to British culture, black women in the diaspora have to be seen to shed some of the African qualities that make them appear a threat or other in western society. Black women in the diaspora who wish to practice spirituality often adopt eastern spiritual practices, which are ironically mediated by white western women and men. It is easier and more acceptable to visibly practice eastern spirituality instead of African spiritualities in the diaspora. However, as Saro-Wiwa makes us aware in the context of Africa, black women's spiritual practices on the continent are no less or more accepted.

⁵⁸⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 101.

resistance, both organized and anonymous” that operate in a realm only accessible to the invited – the black woman’s spiritual realm.⁵⁸⁸

The wig is the technology with which Phyllis practices her collective and communal spirituality. The wig is therefore a kind of spiritual and transcendental technology that transports Phyllis between different modes of being in the world. The technological aspect of the wig also lies in its ability to record and transpose both sound and identities or essences. It is with this in mind that I see Phyllis’s wigs as recording devices. The centralisation of technology (that is, the wig as a technology) might be problematised in relation to sound studies due to its foregrounding of a device as opposed to sound that is not mediated by technology. Stoever chooses to discuss sound studies before the invention of the phonograph to

challenge existing historiographies of sound that give primacy to recording technologies and archives of ‘actual’ sound. Continually privileging recorded texts in the story of sound enacts a kind of technological determinism obscuring how social, cultural and historical forces mediate sound and audio technologies.⁵⁸⁹

Instead, the non-technological aspect of the wig sees the wig as a form of technology that is outside the realm of technology as we understand it. Here I am inspired by Weheliye’s conception of the human as a technology that is capable of both recording and emitting sound.⁵⁹⁰ In using the wig as a recording device, Saro-Wiwa highlights her critique of poorly recorded Nollywood sounds while demonstrating the ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ way in which sound can and should be recorded. She indicates that sound can be recorded (even in busy streets) in a thoughtful way that results in proper playbacks with the right volume. She also indicates the numerous possibilities that sound recording and playback can have – in the case

⁵⁸⁸ Collins, 97.

⁵⁸⁹ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, 24.

⁵⁹⁰ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 30.

of Phyllis, it provides the means to commune with other women and abolish her loneliness. The technology of the wig is in the company of other, more recognisable technologies, such as the non-diegetic tuning of the radio that motions to Phyllis's tuning between different identities.

In *Phyllis*, it is through the recycling and re-use of the wig that a positive black woman world is conjured and performed into being. Phyllis – the entity not completely classifiable as human – is at the centre of this performance. And, it is through the communal and collective practice of black women's spiritualities that the performance takes place. Phyllis has inadvertently been classified as non-human, as a witch, and has been cast out of society. She leads a life of solitude where she devices otherworldly means to gain access back to the inside. This plan culminates in the process of walking around town, selling wigs, and when the women to whom she sells the wigs try them on, a part of their essence, their identity, gets transferred into the wigs. Phyllis then takes back the wig, and goes back into her flat where she tries on the different wigs at different times of the day – some wigs she puts on when she awakens, some when she prays, and others when she sits watching Nollywood movies and while eating. It is at these moments that Phyllis 'becomes' the women who have tried on the wigs. She has drained the essences of black women who are accepted in society and performs that accumulated essence and identity in the comfort of her home. It is this ability that the wig has as a device where things can be recorded and transmitted at a later state that I am viewing the wig as a kind of technology. The wig in *Phyllis* is a recording device which takes on and stores essences and identities. The wigs also record sound. Later, Phyllis transmits the sounds and performs the identities that have been recorded onto the wigs. It is the technology of the wig that advances Phyllis ontological mission.

In the same way, Phyllis's wigs, which record essences as well as sounds, are a kind of sonic and ontological technology that sanction communion, through Phyllis's body, for different black women across different locations and times. The wigs record sounds made by other women and enable Phyllis to speak through them and perform some kind of humanity through them. This sonic recording and playback of black women's voices affords Phyllis some kind of humanity when the voices of their 'previous owners' emanate through or around her body. The sound technology of and in the wig therefore facilitates an ontological humanity for Phyllis. Phyllis builds on the collective voices and identities of the women whose essences have been incepted into the wigs. She borrows from many different women, and in a Frankenstein-like narrative, bits and pieces begin to form and culminate in an almost human Phyllis. Phyllis's body is the vessel through which these different identities come together. This culminates in a community of different black women who are organised through Phyllis's body. And, it is this community of black women that in turn collectively build Phyllis up. Similarly, by virtue of the fact that Phyllis continuously discounts and rejects the normative identities these women themselves have to perform on a daily basis, communing in and through Phyllis helps question and disrupt that which is accepted as normative black womanhood. It ironically also becomes a space for other black women to experiment with different forms of being as they are alerted to other non-normative and abnormative possibilities through this communion. There is therefore a cyclical call and response that has been cultivated between Phyllis and the women in the wigs, and it is made possible in the realm of the spiritual. It is through the technology of the wig that Saro-Wiwa arrives at an always already subjective, human Phyllis. All the attributes that seem to characterise her as lacking in humanness – such as the voice that belongs to someone else but seems to speak through her – are undermined through the film's sonic registers. In this way, Phyllis destabilises and helps us rethink the classification of female witchcraft and the status

of witches as beings on the outskirts of society. This is to say, Phyllis helps us think otherwise about how any non-normative identities – such as an unmarried woman being equated to a witch – are automatically pitted against the concept of the human.

The Performance of Humanism

There is a continual recourse to wigs as a kind of technology that allows Phyllis to ‘assume’ the persona of the human. The wig is employed as a device that allows the figure to *become* human, which is to say, Phyllis puts on humanness through the technology of the wig. The wig seems to bring with it these reassuring female attributes, like smiling, eating and watching television. There is a socialisation process that happens through the wearing of the wig. It indicates a process of isomorphic femininity. At the beginning of the film, Phyllis is outside the human – when she puts on the wig, she gradually becomes *inside* the human – that is to say, she becomes ‘normal’, domesticated and reassuringly feminine. But, there are different things that complicate that process. To analyse Phyllis’s daily performance of black womanhood and of humanity, I want to draw attention to two silent film-like subtitles that Saro-Wiwa offers us in the video. The first, “Phyllis was not a morning person” and the second is “It was that time of the day again”. The two textual analyses will propel our understanding of Phyllis’s behaviour at different parts of the day, of her personhood at any time of the day, and the fact that the actions she undergoes are experienced on a daily basis. The first text speaks to Phyllis humanness, and the second speaks to the repetition of the enactment of black womanhood. By asserting that “Phyllis was not a morning person”, we are called to question whether the statement goes beyond the comical critique of someone who is not highly functional in the mornings and was therefore not a fan of mornings. We are

also called to question whether Phyllis *was* a person in the morning, or if she was some other non-human entity.

Phyllis also performs humanity through communal black feminist spiritualities. The figure of the witch, or the abnormative black woman, undergoes a curative journey to undo her classification as a figure outside society and outside the human. Phyllis's repetitive daily ritual of performing humanness is interesting when linked to Fred Moten's suggestion that blackness is caught up in a continual "performance of humanity".⁵⁹¹ This assertion implies that blackness has historically existed outside the realm of humanity and merely performs humanness. This elicits questions of whether one has to be human in order to perform humanity, and whose performance of humanity is sufficiently human. In other words, is Phyllis human to begin with and thus, does she merely perform humanity, or is she indeed not human and performs humanity to attain humanness? Saro-Wiwa describes Phyllis as a "psychic vampire", someone who "drains your energy" and "downloads your memories, thoughts and emotions — your essence".⁵⁹² She is an entity whose character we do not know, but whose identity is uncomfortably not human. She embodies a humanly vessel – a person recognisable as a woman – but is without that which would arguably complete with the humanly attributes she so desires.⁵⁹³ As a result, Phyllis has found a way to move closer to humanness through wearing used wigs that were previously worn by other women. When she puts these wigs on, she momentarily takes on the identity of the women who wore them before, that is to say, she puts on humanness through the technology of the wig, bringing her from a position outside the human, to one inside the human. While Phyllis has a materially human body, her humanness is contestable because there is still something eerie, vampiric and zombie-like about her. She has the ability to shift ontologies, while still being located

⁵⁹¹ Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2.

⁵⁹² Saro-Wiwa, "Camera Q&A: Zina Saro-Wiwa on Nigeria's Nollywood Cinema," np.

⁵⁹³ Zina Saro-Wiwa, Private communication, 2018.

within a single material human body. Her humanly materiality is coupled with an element of falseness and artificiality, rendering her an approximation of the biological human, as she perpetually falls short of that classification. She has to contend with the deprivation of the humanly experience as the wigs afford her a limited moment in which she can inhabit a limited part of the identity of its previous owner or wearer. She obsessively and vigorously sifts through different ontologies, and goes out into the world to attain more humanly experiences, but they never seem to be enough, they never seem to fulfil whatever humanly identity she desires.

At the centre of this humanly performativity is the idea that Phyllis is performing multiple identities throughout her day. But, none of those resultant identities are fixed, nor are they altogether completely socially acceptable, because, they are not natural. They are a repetitious performing of multiple identities that belong to multiple peoples. The repetition enacted by Phyllis on a daily basis is in a sense an act of refusal – a refusal to comply with the demands that have been imposed upon her. Through the laborious process of the constant search for black femininity and humanness, she at once refuses the apparent desired outcome of the search. Any identity she lands on could and should be sufficient to exist in the world she seeks to be a part of. However, her constant refusal, which lands her in an endless cycle of quotidian performativity – whether conscious or not – becomes testament to the fact that there was never anything wrong with her initial state of being. As such, she at once becomes captive to the cycle of identity performativity, but simultaneously undermines it every time she undergoes it. Phyllis perpetually refuses the definitions that have been attributed to her and through the technology of the wig, she continually performs the black feminist strategy of (spiritual) self-definition. This refusal to settle also potentiates a communing with different women for Phyllis. This is to say, her constant encounters with different women (through the

spiritual realm facilitate by the wigs), enables Phyllis to encounter multiple women, and through her being, her body, her vessel, these different women are able to encounter each other. Her body, therefore, becomes the vessel with which multiple women commune with one another.

Since Saro-Wiwa has set up the narrative for the spectator to question Phyllis's humanity through the whitened-out zombie-like eyes, the elimination of speech and Phyllis's silence – when read in tandem with her whitened out eyes – makes one wonder whether, if Phyllis did speak, the sounds emanating from her body would be unnatural. This is to say, Phyllis's identity that is at the margins of humanism is illustrated by the whiteness of her eyes. Her identity as non-human is reinforced by the possibility that if she were to speak, she might not sound human. There is a danger here of reading, describing and later equating Phyllis's 'silence' and 'inability' (or choice not) to speak with the possibility of non-humanness. This ableist need for humans to speak and to cast people away in a perceived disability if they do not produce 'naturalised' and normalised – that is, standardised to be natural and normal – sounds is also a problem for black womanhood. Armoured with an arsenal of different coloured wigs, she puts on a particular wig, and goes into prayer. It becomes evident that the last woman who wore the wig wore it during a time of prayer. This becomes Phyllis's "praying wig". This action is accompanied by a voice over of a woman praying. It is not Phyllis's voice that we hear – for Phyllis in fact does not have a voice – but rather the voice of the woman who wore the wig before. The use of the voice in this instance, and the separation of the voice from the body (or source) that speaks it indicates a dislocation between the voice that speaks and the body that speaks it. Here, Saro-Wiwa uses this cinematic trait to indicate that, as much as Phyllis desires to be human, there is always an obstacle that prevents her from attaining full humanness.

In *Phyllis's* case, the performance of humanism and subjectivity are in a continuous process of re-enactment. As Fred Moten asserts, there is “the question of whether the performance of subjectivity ... always and everywhere reproduces what lies before it; it is also the question of whether performance in general is ever outside the economy of reproduction”.⁵⁹⁴ In her own performance of subjectivity (and black womanhood) Phyllis reproduces the performance of the subjectivity of other black women (the previous wearer of the wigs). Paradoxically, if the initial daily lives of the black women whose essences Phyllis has absorbed are, according to Moten, themselves a performance of humanism, then Phyllis's performance of humanism is a performance of a performance. This statement assumes two things. Firstly, it assumes that the performance of black womanhood by the women whose essences Phyllis absorbs is a real mode of being black and woman in the world. It also assumes that those performances are original performances of and by those women. But, by virtue of the fact that Phyllis continually changes between wigs and moves between identities, she is never satisfied with the performance of black womanhood that she has selected. She inadvertently undermines this performance, and all performance of humanness and acceptable black womanhood by repeating the acts on a daily basis. While it might appear as though the situation is in control of her because she can never attain that which she wishes to attain, we need to be open to the possibility that the performance of black womanhood is in fact not enough and not adequate for Phyllis. She therefore repeatedly rejects this performance of socially accepted black womanhood daily, undermining the act of the performance of humanity by undergoing it over and over, never accepting the result of the performance(s) and/or their conditions.

⁵⁹⁴ Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 4.

Towards the end of the film, Phyllis closes her eyes and black or red tears run down her face. Since her eyes are closed, we are uncertain as to whether they are her ‘human’ pupiled eyes, or the vampiric, zombie-like white eyes. She therefore enters a kind of third state – neither the all too human black femininity of the woman with the smiling face, nor the non-human white eyes of the blank face and the sinister pulse. The ambivalence of the third state is set up in the video in such a way that it is not explained. Questions are posed and left unanswered: Is Phyllis crying or not? If she is, is she in fact crying blood? If it is blood, why is she smiling? Is the substance red or black? Are her eyes pupiled or zombie-white? And where or what is this third state that Phyllis has gone (or escaped to)? It is the compelling ambiguity that opens up the third state. While the non-narrativised video tells a non-chronological tale, it feels as though Saro-Wiwa is leading us to this realisation and possibility of the third state. The third state is that which perhaps always existed for Phyllis as a mode of salvation, where she does not have to contend with the imposed smiling femininity of the wig wearing Phyllis. The third state is the positive black woman world that is not bound up in problematic representations of black women. It is the safe space that allows for affirming and radical images of black woman and black womanhood. This third, safe, and positive black woman state and space is made possible by black women’s spiritual practices and by the technology of Phyllis’s wig.

The unexplained third state is ambiguous and does not conform to our codes of reading and perceiving the world. We want to know where Phyllis goes and where or what the third state is, but we lack the imagination or the tools to conceive of this state. In other words, society lacks the tools to imagine and construct a positive black woman’s world. In order to not be seen as “‘separatist’, ‘essentialist, and anti-democratic’” for constructing a safe space that allows only black women, Phyllis has found a way of traversing those nonsensical

proclamations by facilitating the communion of the safe space in the spiritual realm away from the prying eyes of judgement.⁵⁹⁵ Collins suggests that “safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups”.⁵⁹⁶ In as much as Saro-Wiwa gives us some insight into the safe space of the spiritual realm, she denies us any voyeurism and surveillance when Phyllis disappears into the third state towards the end of the video. We are not permitted to see what this safe space looks like, and, despite our unrelenting desire to know where Phyllis goes when she closes her eyes and a red substance cascades from her eyes, that is a space where only her and the other black women she communes with are permitted to gather and to see. The immateriality and ephemerality of the third state (or being, or place) is outside the realm of perception for everyone else because the world cannot function as it does if it were a positive black woman’s world. If the third state were to infiltrate this world we inhabit, there would be a disjuncture to the way of the world that would be detrimental to the lives of the many who rely of anti-blackness and anti-black womanhood. Seeing Phyllis close her eyes (thus not revealing whether the third state is the place of her ‘human’ or ‘non-human’ self, or perhaps a culmination of both) makes us wonder if the state she finally achieves could ever be achieved in this world, or if it will always remain the stuff of the outside.

Conclusion

The chapter, *The Sorcerer: Phyllis – Communing through Sonic Black Feminist Spiritualities*, looked at Zina Saro-Wiwa’s video *Phyllis* through her invented form alt-Nollywood as a way of mapping the intersections between continental black womanhood, sound, black women’s spiritualities and the repetitive daily performance of humanness. This chapter, following on briefly from the discussion of black womanhood as a kind of reproductive technology in

⁵⁹⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 110.

⁵⁹⁶ Collins, 111.

Chapter 1, has brought the conversation about ontology as it relates to blackness to gender, primarily through black women's systems of knowledge production. The first section aimed to describe alt-Nollywood as a transgression against the problematic components of Nollywood, specifically loud sounds and the representation of women as witches. In the description of alt-Nollywood, I proceeded to offer some reservation I have with certain criticisms towards the improvisatory nature of Nollywood, and instead chose to see these sonic and visual impurities as generative. I do, however, find alt-Nollywood's discussion of gender as essential to the current climate of the representation of black women in moving image.

It is from this standpoint that I proceeded to discuss the beauty inherent in the loudness of Nollywood when considered in relation to Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's notion of the "sonic color line" as well as the community building-nature of Alexander Weheliye's phonographic call and responses. It is through Weheliye that I arrived at the proposition of the wig as a device capable of recording and disseminating sound, essences, and ontologies in the section of wigs as recording device. The chapter then showed how the relationship between sound and the wig represented by Saro-Wiwa potentiate a safe space for black women to exist through the spiritual realm.

A sonic and videographic journey through *Phyllis* revealed itself to pose more questions than concrete answers. When Saro-Wiwa proposed alt-Nollywood, it was a call to contemplate alternate ways of visual, sonic and ideological representations of black womanhood. Hers was a call towards a rethinking of a genre that had its shortcomings. It was never a call at a complete re-hauling or dismissal of Nollywood. Similarly, the attempt to think through and alongside alt-Nollywood instantiated a further call and necessitated an ongoing tug and pull

at the questions of sonic representation as it relates to black women living on the continent. Amidst the ambivalence and paradoxes, a conclusion was however reached: controlling images of black women, to borrow from Patricia Hill Collins, can be re-examined and eradicated. As the chapter has shown through *Phyllis*, this can happen in safe spaces that are created by black women where communal discussion and activism can prosper. In *Phyllis*, the safe space (and an imagining of positive black womanhood) is presented as existing in the arena of the spiritual. Saro-Wiwa thus attests to the important and generative work that can be achieved through paying attention to the communal and activist nature of black women's spiritual practices, and black women's knowledge systems in general.

Conclusion

Decolonising the Bibliography: How I arrived at Appositional Conceptions of Continental Blackness

Upon arriving at a European institution from a South African university to embark on this thesis, one thing was clear from the onset: I would ensure that the readings I engage with that were to inform a thesis about contemporary art practice in Africa, would be largely by African scholars. The decision to discuss video art, as has been evidenced in the chapters above, led to an interesting debate about time. This led to the intended incorporation of theories of temporalities in Africa as they appear in the work of Kwasi Wiredu and the contested writings of John Mbiti.⁵⁹⁷ These African philosophies of time were going to be adopted in the discussion of non-chronological temporalities in African video art. This would have followed in the steps of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of decolonising the mind, evolving it into a practice of decolonising one's bibliography.⁵⁹⁸ The idea of decolonising the bibliography of the thesis would mean relying on the rich theories that exist in Africa and not relying on canonical western philosophies. However, these attempts were obliterated by the usual narrative of needing to engage western canons under the conviction that scholarship that does not engage these canons is incomplete. Suffering this burden of citation, Mbiti and Wiredu morphed into Henri Bergson, and *Time and Free Will* replaced "The Concept of Time".⁵⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida's conception of spectrality and hauntology superseded the initial intention of discussion spectrality through the notion of ancestry as is appears in many African customs.⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁷ Wiredu, "Introduction: African Philosophy of Our Time"; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

⁵⁹⁸ Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

⁵⁹⁹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

⁶⁰⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*.

The quest towards a decolonised bibliography extended to developing innovative ideas that were used by African creative practitioners as theories in the thesis. An earlier version of the framework chapter introduced the notion of Zim Ngqawanism as a mode of self-mythologising. Zim Ngqawana is a South African musician who introduced the concept of Zimology through his 1998 album, *Zimology*. Ngqawana's music – including in the album, *Vadzumi* (2004), meaning ancestors – speaks to issues of African knowledge systems, notions of witchcraft and African cosmology. His theories (for the music and the persona of the artist were read as theories in their own right) were to be used as theories in the discussion of Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's self-mythologising, and in relation to spectrality, ancestry, African spiritualities and the sonic as they appear in the rest of the thesis chapters. While these ideas were sadly dissuaded as their place in the thesis was contested, they were nonetheless tabled to be explored after the completion of the thesis.

A change in supervision finally opened up the possibility of abandoning some of these western philosophies, and while the thesis evidences that a full return to Wiredu, Mbiti, and Ngqawana was not accomplished – once a seed of doubt had been planted, the confidence with which to return fully was deterred – the concept of continental blackness, which holds the entirety of the project, developed alongside African-American scholarship that was prominent within the institution at the time. A decision was made to allow the generative nature of these African-American theories, which anyway do not exist independent of influences from Africa, to be utilised in the thesis in ways that might be useful. The emergence of my conception of continental blackness will no doubt continue to develop after the completion of this project, and I will continue to argue that the paradoxical pull to scholarship of blackness from the US is so strong that it cannot, and perhaps should not, be

avoided. What is important in the development of a continental theory of blackness, however, is to ensure that these theories do not appear subservient to these western notions.

Continental Blackness through Technology, Fugitivity, Spectrality and African Spiritual Practices

In the end, the thesis explored the idea that blackness has been a topic of discussion and contention among contemporary African video artists in the past decade. The construction of continental blackness was read through its triangulated histories of pre-colonialism, colonialism and post-colonialism. In the thesis, I considered continental blackness, that is, blackness and the black condition that is specific to the lived experiences of black people in Africa – as opposed to its diasporic equivalent – through contemporary African video art practices. I approached blackness through black diasporic definitions outlined by Afro-pessimist and Black Optimist scholars and considered how those experiences and theories translate to a continental context. I explored how the ontology of blackness is buttressed by violent and subjugating encounters. I then indicated the fact that the artists discussed in the thesis make a point of outlining continuous configurations and constellations of refusals and resistance against the violent conditions that created and continue to create and reinforce anti-blackness. I paid attention to those moments of refusals, including through the relationship between blackness and technology (Dineo Seshee Bopape's *is i am sky*), the fugitivity of blackness (Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's *spin*), black spectrality and its haunting capacity (Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*), and the emancipatory potential of black feminist spiritual practices (Zina Saro-Wiwa's *Phyllis*).

The thesis argued that, despite the many facets of anti-blackness that are encountered on the continent, black people are always involved in daily acts of refusal(s). It showed how African continental blackness was embroiled in a continuous quest of self-determination and self-assertion. Continental blackness as it appears in these works takes on an activist and interventionist dimension aimed at signalling to alternative modes of living. What is compelling about these interventions is that the nature of the activism does not immediately appear as such. It takes a closer reading and understanding of what is at stake in the work to see and hear the poetic forms of resistance in the works, thus attesting to the multifaceted constellation of revolutionary endeavours. The videos are not discussed as proposing modes of refusal for continental blackness. Instead, they are seen for their reflection of already existing activist strategies, both past and present, and how they might be carried out well into the future. Through the videos, a few realisations about the nature of continental blackness and its everyday forms of micro and macro modes of refusals were made.

Beginning with the opening case study, *is i am sky*, on the relationship between blackness and technology was deliberate. The case study referred to the technological aspect of video art and foregrounded the possibilities of discussing time, space and sound inherent in the medium of video. By concentrating on the videographic strategies and choices made by Bopape, the chapter gestured towards the centralisation of the technological mode of video that was to run throughout the rest of the thesis. The argument made through *is i am sky* was that a correlation can be made between continental blackness and technology. There was a centralisation of song and sound and their generative emancipatory possibilities for eradicating anti-black system that still operate to this day. The fluid and continual metamorphosis of South African struggle songs – that were introduced to combat the various forms of anti-black structures across the centuries – were read alongside Bopape's

representation of her body's continuous morphing with the landscape and the sky. Highlighting the importance of song (in the form of freedom or struggle songs), the chapter attests to communal and systematic forms of refusals against a common threat to the livelihoods of black people. It indicated how people of different political and ideological backgrounds would come together for a common goal of resisting anti-blackness. Bopape's foregrounding of the videographic and sonic mixers achievable in post-production brought technology to the fore, thus denouncing the supposed adversarial relationship between blackness and technology. Instead, technology is centred as always already available to black people, and indicates the ways in which it can, and has been, mobilised towards the attainment of freedom.

The idea of the concurrent cyclical production and reproduction of continental blackness alongside generative methods of refusal became the basis of the Fugitive chapter. Here I contemplated the notion of fugitivity, with its oft-African-American centralisation, through the continent. Fugitivity as it relates to continental blackness is closely linked to labour and the abuse of black bodies in the advancement of colonial economic endeavours. The colonial and anthropometric grid systems are some of the visible colonial structures of controlling the livelihood and mobility of black people in the colonies. It was thus interesting to concentrate on a glitch in the video *spin* as a way of arguing the precarity of these physical modes of systematic oppressions, and to contemplate the seemingly minute and invisible ways in which blackness undermines the grid system. Blackness was discussed through colonisation and how there has historically been a fight for resources. The role that blackness was meant to play in these fights was as labourers intended to advance the economic ambitions of the colonisers. But, political events and parties continuously sought ways of going against the system. Considering the relationship (sometimes aspirational, sometimes contestable)

between blackness and humanism, *The Spectre* chapter aimed to locate continental blackness in current and ongoing black studies debates about blackness and humanness. By introducing the figure of the black spectre, blackness in the post-revolutionary post-colony was seen to aspire to (and to have always been located in) a position and status inside the human.

As a concluding chapter, *The Sorcerer* allows a return to some of the concepts explored in other chapters. The notion of humanness that was explored in *The Spectre* was conjured through *Phyllis* and the quest for black women who are seen to be on the periphery of society aiming for normative humanly status. This status of being outside the human, through the figure of the witch, was read in relation to black women's spiritual practices and evidenced the necessity to pay attention to black women's knowledge systems in the quest for eradicating anti-black systems. The struggle towards a positive black world, was seen to not be without its problems, as enabling systems such as Nollywood are seen to not account for what Adrian Piper calls the triple negation of black women.⁶⁰¹ In other words, in the attempt to attain freedom for black people, further safe spaces for the fugitivity of black women need to be acknowledged.

The representation of blackness through creative practices, specifically moving image, sought to maintain the damaging, primitivising and othering imagery of black people through early film. However, movements and genres such as Nollywood indicate a successful quest to undermine those damaging modes of representing blackness and Saro-Wiwa's alt-Nollywood is a continuation of those activist endeavours, most notably by bringing in gender and indicating what the conditions of continental black womanhood can tell us about blackness (that even within emancipatory practices of blackness, further work needs to be carried out to

⁶⁰¹ Piper, "The Triple Negation of Coloured Women Artists."

account for intersectional issues of race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity, among others). Continental blackness is useful for the endeavoured exercise considering the intensity with which blackness is oftentimes attributed to African-American black people and its relation to slavery. Contemporary discussions about blackness, as indicated in the scholarship cited throughout the thesis, often begin and end with the Atlantic slave trade and fail to account for other forms of blackness experienced in other locales. While this is not an issue in itself – African-American scholars and their exploration of their own condition cannot be problematised – the issue lies in the ubiquity and overrepresentation of these conditions as the sole and primary mode of being black in the world. In that same vein, modes of resistance are easily equated to those implemented by African-Americans while not accounting for other modes of activism experienced by black people in other parts of the world. Continental blackness, therefore, does not necessarily begin and end with colonialism. Instead, it begins and ends with the multiple experiences and forms of resistances that run through the entire continent. It serves a dual purpose of discounting an assumed singular blackness gleaned from African-American scholarship, while demonstrating more specific modes of being and resistance that are specific to different parts of the continent.

Despite acknowledging the shortcomings of African-American blackness as an umbrella mode of being black in the world, the thesis has indicated that it is nonetheless productive to continue from the generative conversations these scholarships, in conjunction with African scholarships, potentiate. Reading continental blackness through the theories articulated by African-American scholarship is, however, not cumbersome. It fits snugly within the geographic and temporal framework of the thesis, with sensitivity to the difference(s) in context. The idea of fugitivity does not necessarily have its roots in the Fugitive Slave Act and in African-Americans' desire to escape the US for Africa. The moments of escape by

South African slaves and prisoners of war from Robin Island or from the Kimberly mines are undeniably exemplary of continental blackness and fugitivity. Apartheid South African history is filled with acts of political figures fleeing the country and going into exile in Botswana, Angola, France, the Netherlands, and other places. Furthermore, the correlation between spirituality and blackness (and more specifically spirituality and black womanhood) does not begin and end with voodoo in Haiti, across the Caribbean and in the US south. Spirituality as an essential mode of activism has clearly guided African life, culture and politics in generative ways throughout the centuries.

To discuss continental blackness through artworks produced by artists from four countries might seem contentious when considering the assertion that Africa is not a country but rather a large area comprising a multiplicity of identities, cultures and modes of being. But, the indication ascertained from these different locales – South Africa (*is i am sky*), Botswana (*spin*), Angola (*Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*) and Nigeria (*Phyllis*) attests to the ubiquity of daily acts of refusals and activism, and boldly insinuates that while continental blackness differs in different African countries, and while the modes of resistance differ as well, the fact that resistance exists is taken as a given. By concentrating on the poetics of these refusal methods, the thesis signalled to some of the possibilities of anti-black resistance. It is clear that my reading of the videos through fugitivity, spectrality, sorcery and technology is aspirational. It is rooted in the long history of political activism that first aimed to negotiate peacefully with the coloniser, to taking on militant and dire measures to be seen as equal and to attain freedom. I have drawn attention to the videos' signalling towards what is wrong with the world for black people, but have also read through the proposed strategies for healing and recuperation in the works.

It is clear, through close reading and analysis of the creative and cultural aspects of the videos, and at the historical and political moments they cite, that as long as oppressive systems existed, there were constantly reinventions of blackness and ways of being black. It is these moments and methods of subterfuge and undermining the system that were read as black refusals against anti-black structures. As the thesis has indicated, anti-blackness is still an ongoing aggravation in Africa even after the attainment of freedom, or in the post-revolutionary moment. This suggests that acts of resistance and refusal are not conceived of as complete and do not infer absolution. The continued struggles for blackness indicate that refusals do not bring about a complete eradication of racist structures, nor do they shift the system in what might be classified as visibly and audibly significant ways. However, by virtue of their very existence, acts of refusals make it difficult for anti-black system to operate uncontested. It is in this difficulty for structural racism that the important and necessary work of refusal discloses itself.

The videos in the thesis all signal, in one way or another, to otherworldliness in further and ongoing quests for emancipation. Be it a retreat to the cosmos (*is i am sky*) or one to an unfortold third or endless realm (*Phyllis*), alternative spaces and geographies are a common feature in the imagination of positive black existences. Realms that do not resemble reality are attractive for many reasons, including the ability to imagine unhindered by the realities of anti-blackness on earth. By constructing and imagining a generative space that has not been tainted by the violence that blackness encounters on a daily basis, what is potentiated is an uninterrupted safe space to conceptualise how blackness should and can be lived. In other words, situating the works in normative geographies might impinge on imagination because it is haunted by the realities of quotidian life. However, by stepping outside of the norm, something different and generative is at stake.

is i am sky's endless realm and *Phyllis*'s third state help us ask, what are these positive black worlds that we are wanting to imagine into being? Where does positive blackness exist, or where *can* it exist? Can it exist in the inside, which would require a complete rehauling of the current system, or does it exist in the outside in the same way that Afrofuturists like Sun Ra imagined (by only leaving the space of the inside). Bopape attempts to represent it, at the same time as *Phyllis* escapes (or goes to it) but it is never represented and it is never seen. The same applies to *Concrete Affection*, where the ships go to the seemingly 'utopian' place, but it is not represented. Sunstrum overtly looks at utopia and the possibility of African futurity that is yet to come and can only be imagined. The manner in which otherworldliness as a possible space for imagining alternative forms of black lives can be construed as escapist. However, the thesis indicated a stark difference between escapism and the generative nature of fugitivity. Furthermore, as discussed in *The Sorcerer* in relation to spiritual practices, (and the spiritual realm constitutes the realm of otherworldliness and imagination), events in the alternative spaces have real consequences in 'real life'. As such, retreating to the world of the imagination as a mode of resistance, or as a means to plot resistant acts, should be registered as valid, as fugitive, and not escapist, forms of activism.

While the videos discussed were all produced in a period after 2010, there is an atemporality that was suggested through the videos' continual return to previous moments, such as the formation of struggle songs in nineteenth century South Africa (*is i am sky*), twentieth century Botswana (*spin*), 1970s Angola (*Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*) and Nollywood and its relationship to colonial African filmmaking (*Phyllis*). The videos themselves are contemporary in that they were produced in the past decade; they do, however, revert back to previous notable moments in the history of blackness in Africa. They read these against the

contemporary moment and the continued insistence of blackness to refuse its imposed condition. Thusly, the collective ethos they appear to purport is that, the activist nature of blackness is timeless. The atemporality of the videos is also presented (temporally, spatially, and sonically) in the videos through slowing down and presenting events in and as a kind of tedium. The idea of slowing down, of stillness and quietness, becomes a means of reflecting on anti-blackness, but more importantly, slowing down as a means of imagining and strategising for and towards positive blackness.

The vast temporal reference in the works attests to the continuous configuration and reconfiguration of continental blackness. Warren's statement that blackness is borne from violent encounters, and Wynter's assertion that blackness and its relationship to humanism is caught in a cyclical process of making and unmaking allow the exploration of continental blackness across vast temporalities to make sense. Blackness is then seen to encounter the Portuguese in the 1500s in Angola, the apartheid regime in 1948 South Africa, as well as the damaging representation of blackness and Africanness in early twentieth century film. Conterminous with these accounts of the cyclical creation of anti-blackness are the modes of resistance that reveal themselves in the videos discussed. In discussing methods of refusals and resistance in continental blackness, the sonic has disclosed itself to be a recurring motif. It appears in all the videos discussed, in *is i am sky* through struggle song, in *spin* through the silence of the video, in *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady* through the disembodied voiceover, and in *Phyllis* through the wig as a recording device. In *is i am sky*, the adoption of struggle songs were one of the ways in which resistance was mobilised, and the nature and intensity of the songs were aptly reimagined to suit the various forms of oppressions across centuries.

The commendable means with which resistance and activism is illustrated in the video is not without its shortcomings. As is seen in the case of Saro-Wiwa's "alt-Nollywood" and its inability to fully accept Nollywood's 'inferior' technical quality, and Henda's missed opportunity to represent the space of the black fantastic further work needs to be done to find ways that are sensitive to all kinds of continental black existences. The Nongqawuse Syndrome and the Cattle Killing Movement is a further case in point. By killing off a large number of cattle in the hope that they would not fall in the hands of the British or the Dutch was a bold move that sadly had dire and fatal outcomes for South Africa's Xhosa population. However, as argued in *The Fugitive* chapter, these seemingly failed attempts at resistance and refusals should never wholly be articulated as failures. Considering Robin Kelley's proclamation that successful revolutions and subversive acts are not measurable only by their outcome, these 'failed attempts' are nonetheless modes of refusals and refusal.⁶⁰² As such, the limitations of some aspects of representing resistance are still considered generative within the context of the thesis. The relationship between blackness and its methods of daily refusal as they appear in artistic practice is cause for further investigation. The thesis signalled towards some forms of blackness and refusals through a handful of case studies with close links to four countries on the continent. Even within these studies, certain ideas that revealed themselves to be pertinent to possible future study of emancipatory forms of continental blackness surfaced. For instance, the continuous return to sound and its potential for reading blackness on the continents is an interesting point of departure for future study. Furthermore, the notion of otherworldliness and that of African spiritual economies also opens up exciting avenues of future research.

⁶⁰² Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, ix.

Conclusion and Future Plans

The thesis has been concerned with the relationship between continental blackness and video art and how they appear in contemporary African art practices. It foregrounds innovative and poetic articulations of being black on the continental and illustrate how contemporary African video arts are already engaged in conversations about the nature of continental blackness and the nature of daily acts of refusal against systematic racism. The constellation between blackness and technology, fugitivity, spectrality and black women's spiritual practices are some of the ways in which black people negotiate their being in the world. These constellations do not always resemble what can readily be classified as success – as in the case of failed fugitivity, or Nollywood's overlooking of the representation of black women. However, as has been insisted throughout the thesis and through the videos, all forms of resistance and refusals are measurable and contribute significantly to escaping anti-black existences.

At the end of this journey, a cyclical process has materialised as I swiftly return to the initial intention of decolonising the bibliography and finding ways of articulating my ideas using African conceptions and knowledge systems. I am excited to see what form the pages in this thesis will take when they are unencumbered by the need to fit within the canon, and what will begin to happen when the dissuasions experienced at the beginning of the project begin to be fully abandoned. To that end, I will be working on the concept of Zim Ngqawanism as a theory with which to read and understand the current interest in a continued engagement with African spiritual economies. Once a definition of Zim Ngqawanism, which will be explored through Ngqawana's conception of Zimology, has been offered, it will be used to unpack the ways in which contemporary African artists, including Saro-Wiwa, Bopape and Sunstrum,

are mobilising spiritualities and cosmologies in their practice. This will be published as a journal article. Furthermore, while the thesis did not engage with the South African conception of *ubuntu* (or *botho*), in future, *ubuntu* will be considered as a means with which to speak about the recurring issue of humanness and humanity in the thesis.⁶⁰³ In addition to the concept of *ubuntu*, the work of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela on what it means to be human after encounters with systematic violence and trauma will be engaged to come to a better understanding of humanness as it relates to contemporary Africa.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela describes *ubuntu* as “an ethic based on the understanding that one’s subjectivity is inextricably intertwined with that of others in one’s community. From the perspective of *ubuntu*, all people are valued as part of the human community and worthy of being so recognized. This entails not blind acceptance of others, no matter what they do, but rather an orientation of openness to others and a reciprocal caring that fosters a sense of solidarity.” Gobodo-Madikizela, *What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Historical Trauma? Re-Envisioning The Sunflower and Why Hanna Arendt Was Wrong*, 40.

⁶⁰⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela, “What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence?: Towards the Horizon of an Ethics of Care.”

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