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I Hope My Black Skin Don't Dirt This White Tuxedo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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BA, Special in Visual Arts University of the West Indies, 2016

MFA, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020

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May 2020

Acknowledgments

Freddy,

I wish you were here.

Somos amigos solos.

In no specific order:

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“Less morose and more present”¹

¹ Frank Ocean, “Siegfried” track 15 on *Blonde*, Boys Don’t Cry, 2016, Apple Music

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Abstract

I Hope My Black Skin Don't Dirt This White Tuxedo

By Luis Vasquez La Roche, Master of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.

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I Hope My Black Skin Don't Dirt This White Tuxedo is a series of works--sculpture, installations, and performances--that explore themes of shame, failure, commodity, ephemerality, ritual, resilience, erasure, race, and death. The research and interest in these themes stem from a page of the Trinidad and Tobago Slave Registry. I use the research that surrounds this document to highlight different moments in history, in my personal life, and to imagine near futures.

Hope My Black Skin Don't Dirt This White Tuxedo

Introduction

Since I found the Slave Registry of Trinidad and Tobago in 2015, I have taken a deep dive into what is my Blackness. I used the document as a point of departure to research other components of the African Slave Trade. I became interested in aspects of the slave trade that repeat themselves in varying ways in the present. Aspects such as labor, death, erasure, oppression, violence, and discrimination are profoundly present. Even though the slave trade managed to dehumanize millions of Black people, with the consequence of continuing to do so in the present, we can find hope, resistance, and resilience.

An essential part of the research is an inquiry regarding material associated with the history of the slave trade. I employ these materials in my work to articulate aspects of race, identity, culture, politics, and spirituality. Some of my works are installations that require a live component for activation, some works are sculptural, and occasionally these objects become props for a live performance.

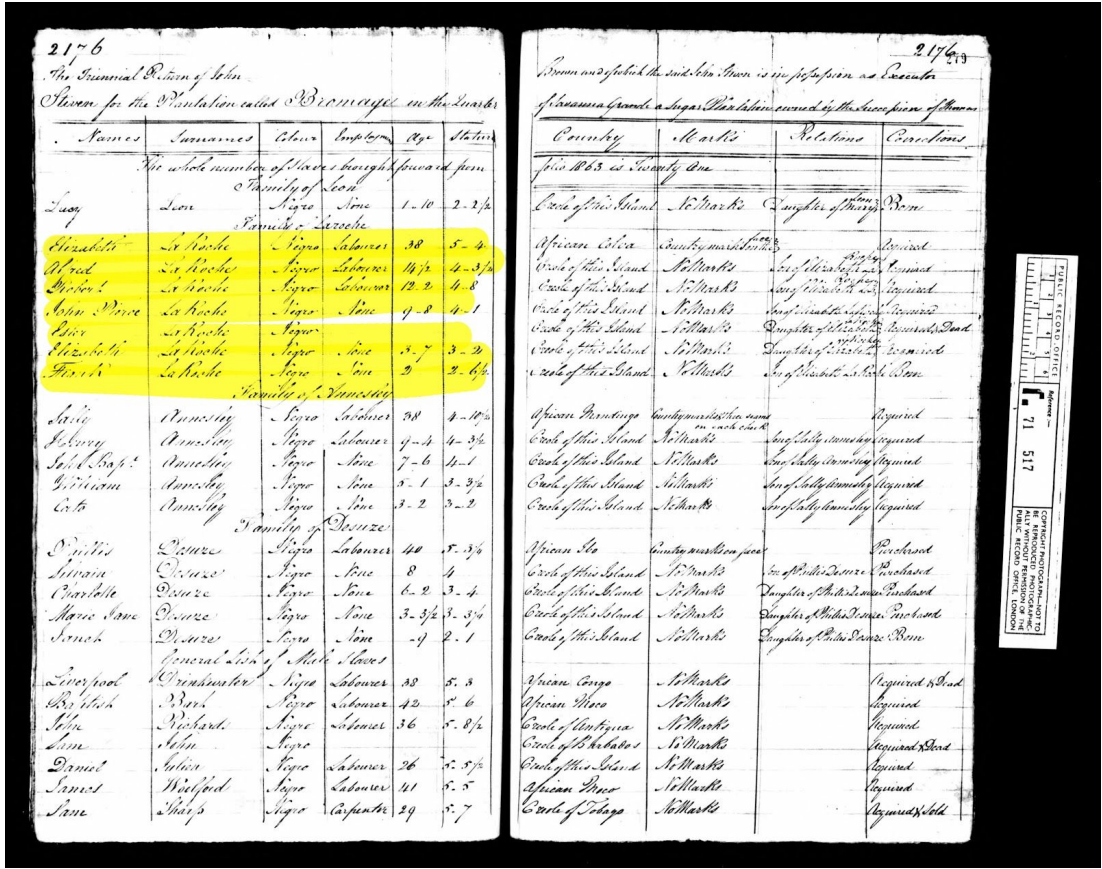
Past

Elizabeth / elizabeth

The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago carry a wide range of documents that trace and record the Government transactions but also documents that are part of the history of the Island. From the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago to the Indian Indentureship records or Registry of Slaves. The Registry of Slaves was started in 1813. This inventory was carried out every 3 years in order to fight the illegal transportation of slaves due to the abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807². Each page classifies the African slaves by names, age, color, sex, occupation, and country of origin. At the top of each of these lists, you can see the name of the families that own the slaves. If a slave was sold from one family to another their name will be recorded under a new family name. Dates of birth or death and relatives are also included in the registry.

I have been trying to trace my lineage to the La Roche name in the Slave Registry since I first discovered it in 2015. I have looked through documents and family trees and official documents from the Red House (House of Parliament), The Ministry of Legal Affairs, and The National Archives in Trinidad and Tobago. The documents I am in search of were either destroyed or untraceable. I began trying to check other elements such as literature, history, and art history in the Caribbean. Gaps in the knowledge and information of the slave trade became apparent as a common thread in this history. Some of the information is absent because it was never recorded, and in other instances, it is due to folks not wanting to remember.

² “Registry of Slaves.” Registry of Slaves | National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://natt.gov.tt/node/132>.



The Slave Registry (Digital copy) - National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago

The inability to locate the history of my lineage, despite significant endeavor, led to failure and shame as a foundation of the work. The failure of the transatlantic slave trade, the failure of putting these histories back together, or the failure in the actions taken to create the work. On the other hand, shame comes in the shape of avoiding to acknowledge being from Afrodescendant to the point that certain histories are erased. Achille Mbembe says in his essay *The Subject to the World*:

“In some parts of the New World, the memory of slavery is deliberately repressed by descendants of African slaves. The tragedy at the origin of the drama that constitutes their existence in the present is constantly denied... this denial is not equivalent to forgetting as such. It is both refusal to acknowledge one’s ancestry and a refusal to remember an act that arouses feelings of shame.”³

³ Achille Mbembé, “Subject of the World” *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas, and Europe*. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002.), 26

The attempt to bridge those knowledge gaps becomes an important part of the work. I try to bridge these gaps through research but due to the number of documents and literature available, or the lack thereof, it becomes impossible to reconstruct history.

One aspect of research focused on the history of painting in Martinique of individuals under the last name La Roche. Another component of research had to do with symbols and icons that represented or depicted families who were plantation owners or in positions of power. Looking for families that were painted who had the name La Roche was another way to possibly find the slave owner of the name that I found on the slave registry (Elizabeth La Roche). Slave masters gave slaves their last name to identify ownership over them. One of the most evident and important parts of the portrait paintings was the clothing the individuals were wearing and the backgrounds they were portrayed in. The backgrounds, clothing or props will point to or indicate certain types of objects that were only owned by wealthy families.

I create a portrait by using a Victorian-era silhouette in a vein similar to the work of Kehinde Wiley, wherein he appropriates and recreates historical paintings by changing the background, and the subjects to Black people in order to place Black subjects in a position of power, or simply to be seen. In *Elizabeth // elizabeth* I try to create a portrait of my possible slave ancestor by appropriating the silhouette for one of these paintings from the late 1700s. The silhouette that I appropriated was of a woman in a dress from the Victorian era. I recreated this portrait in gold glitter. I did not recreate any of the props in the background as I don't think they belong to her history. I cannot assume what her context should be, so I did not add a background. Additionally, I do not know how she looked and therefore only used a silhouette to portray her. The sole purpose of creating a painting, a portrait, or any representation is owing to the fact that such objects can be considered items that signify importance and power.

I use gold glitter to create this work due to a memory I have from primary school, where we made cards for our mother for Mother's Day. We would cover the entire background with glitter, then cut



Appropriated image of Victorian-era Painting



Installation of "Elizabeth / elizabeth" 2018

out the silhouette of our mother and paste it on top of the glitter. Using a stencil without any adhesive to hold it in place, the portrait of my possible slave ancestor is installed on the ground. Multiples of the silhouette are created to move away from the idea of an original or singular representation.



Activation Aftermath of "Elizabeth / elizabeth" 2018

The audience is allowed to interact with the glitter portrait image that is on display on the ground. They are allowed to walk over it, sit or just look at it and be in its presence. This work is an installation that gets activated by the audience, and occasionally by the atmospheric conditions of the space where it is installed (wind mostly), causing the silhouettes to get erased. The work eventually gets fully erased by me. I kneel at the top of each silhouette and I begin to erase the silhouette by writing words in the glitter. Finally, I proceed to completely destroy the image by pushing the glitter with my hands in several directions. Bruno Latour, considers this action an iconoclasm in his book *What is Iconoclasm? Or is there*

a world beyond the image wars?. They describe a different way to think about an iconoclasm, where the viewer would also have the time to gaze at the destroyed icon.

“It is an attempt to turn around, to envelop, to embed the worship of image destruction; to give it a home, a site, a museum space, a place for meditation and surprise. Instead of iconoclasm being the meta-language reigning as a master over all other languages, it is the worship of iconoclasm itself which, in turn, is interrogated and evaluated.”⁴

The romanticization of the Late Georgian and the Victorian era is something that occurs in Trinidad and Tobago. Evidence of this can be seen through the representation of Victorian characters in Carnival. This has been an ongoing controversy on the island and surfaces every time a Mas maker depicts the era in a band. “La Belle Dame and Garçon de la Maison” (French for “The Beautiful Lady and the House Boy”)⁵ is one of these representations. Similarly, in this work, I expect my audience to reflect on the preservation or the destruction of the image and reasoning behind such positions.

Epidermis glistened like a newly-blacked boot + (Forgive me and Stranger in the Village)

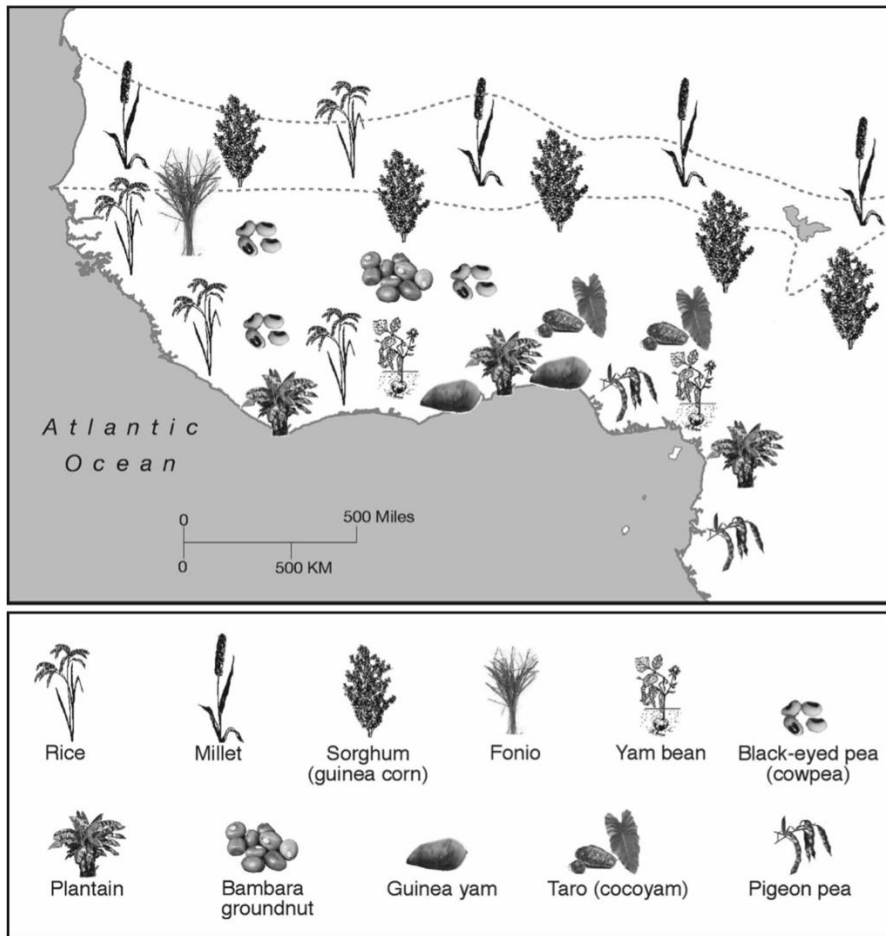
I consider the Trinidad and Tobago Slave Registry the point of departure for most of my research and projects. During my investigation, I began looking into the foods and plants that were brought along with the enslaved Africans. In the mid-fifteenth-century African food staples--plantain, guinea yam, pigeon peas or black-eyed peas amongst many others--were taken to Europe and the Americas.

“Africans have contributed more than one hundred species to global food supplies. The plants they gave the world include pearl (bulrush) millet, sorghum, coffee, watermelon, black-eyed pea, okra, palm oil, the kola nut, tamarind, hibiscus, and a species of rice.”⁶

⁴ Bruno Latour. “What is Iconoclasm ? or Is there a world beyond the image wars ?” *Iconoclasm*: Cambridge, (MA: MIT Press, 2002), 17

⁵ Janine Mendes-Franco, “A Trinidad & Tobago Carnival Band Is Accused of Trivialising the Trauma of Slavery,” *Global Voices*, October 26, 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/10/25/a-trinidad-tobago-carnival-band-is-accused-of-trivialising-the-trauma-of-slavery/>

⁶ Judith A Carney and Richard Nicholas. Rosomoff. *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2011), 7



Principal African foods staples during the slave trade

“Although food and water were strictly rationed during the voyage, an effort was made to “fatten’ the captives before they were sold. To make their skin look healthy and shiny, captives were rubbed with a combination of gunpowder, lemon juice, and palm oil and then polished with a ‘danby brush’.”⁷

Palm oil is one of the items that was brought to the Americas and Europe. In the present, it is used to make food and cosmetics products. It was combined with gunpowder and lemons, then poured over slaves to be scrubbed and polish, almost like a shoe. This served to cover any wounds and marks that slaves sustained during their capture and transport through the middle passage.

⁷ National Park Service. *Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Research Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement*. (Atlanta, GA: NPS Southeast Regional Office, 2005), 17

“Once the captive African had endured the required quarantine period in the pest houses and were deemed free of infectious disease, a merchant or merchant company took responsibility for them and arranged for their sale. Before being placed on the auction block and sold to the highest bidder, Africans were stripped naked, washed, shaved, and rubbed with palm oil. Wounds or scars on their bodies were filled with tar. Before making purchases, potential buyers inspected the teeth and bodies of enslaved men and women in minute detail.”⁸

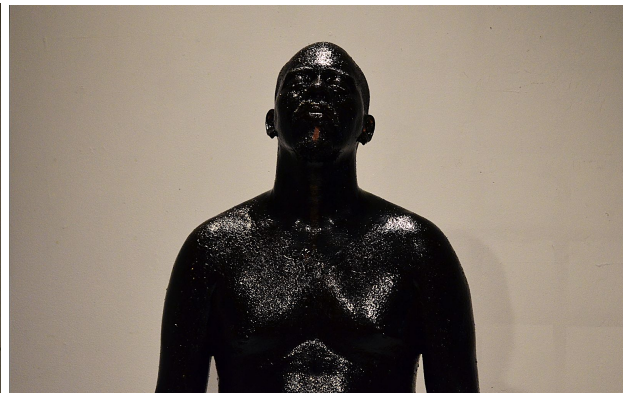


Illustration of "Deck of Slave Ship, Jamaica, 19th cent."

I used palm oil in several works--to make the text on paper, as mortar, or to combine with glitter to cover my body. In *Epidermis glistened like a newly-black'd boot* work, I combine gunpowder, palm oil, and lemon juice and cover my body in this mixture. The work takes shape as a performance. I absorbing the mixture until the point I start blowing it out of my nose with quick blows to enable

⁸ National Park Service. *Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Research Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement*. (Atlanta, GA: NPS Southeast Regional Office, 2005), 20

breathing. Some of the mixture gets into my throat and I cough, so I try to spit it out. While this is proceed to scrub and then wipe myself. During the process of covering my body, my eyes are completely close. I am unable to see throughout the performance. My fully covered skin, nose, eyes, and mouth start happening to my body I begin to scrub my skin with a brush. I stop and begin to crawl in the space to find a wall or something to help me stand up. Once I stand up, I begin to walk around with the brush in my hand to find an audience member to brush and polish me. If I feel that the person who is brushing me is being too soft I will grab their hand and force them to brush me more with greater intensity. After I make my way through a few folks, I pick up some towels, close to the bucket with the mixture, and I wipe my face. For the first time in the performance, I am able to more or less open my eyes. I can feel the palm oil burning and the gunpowder residue in my eyes.

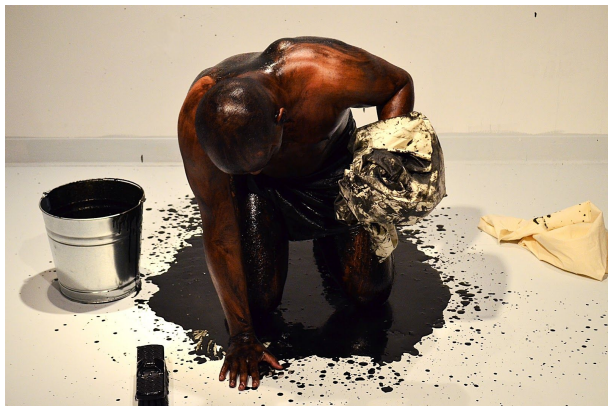
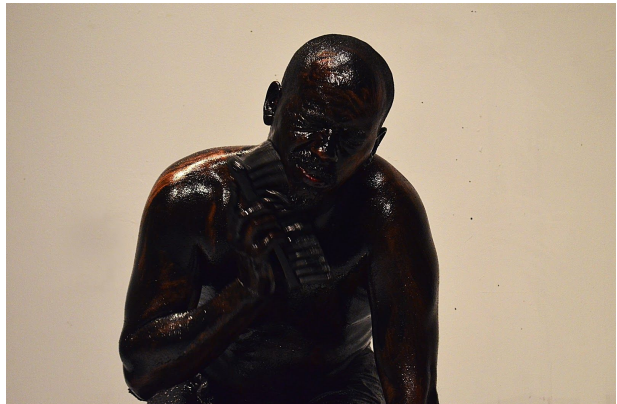


Performance "Epidermis glistened like a newly-blacked boot" 2018

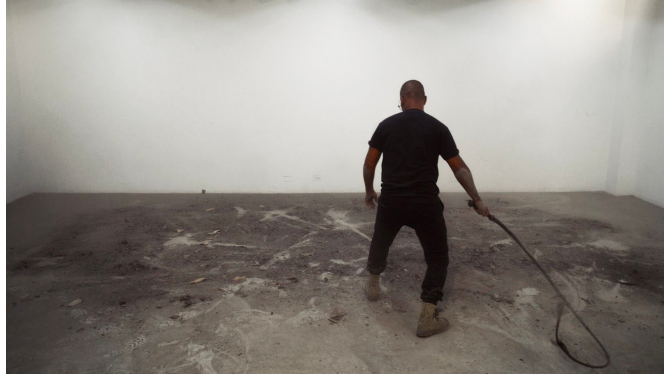
Similar to my actions with the brush, I find audience members to wipe the mixture off my body. As they finish wiping my body, I walk back to the bucket. Behind the bucket, there is a 6ft long leather whip. I pick up the whip, then without words and only bodily gestures, I signal the audience to get out. I begin to crack the whip. If they don't move I push them towards the exit. Once outside, everyone can see me through a glass window as I remain inside.

On the floor are ashes. I drop to my knees. Using both of my hands I write the phrase *forgive me*. I stand up and proceed to erase the phrase by whipping the ashes. The ash fills the air.

Then...the lights go out.



Performance "Epidermis glistened like a newly-blacked boot" 2018

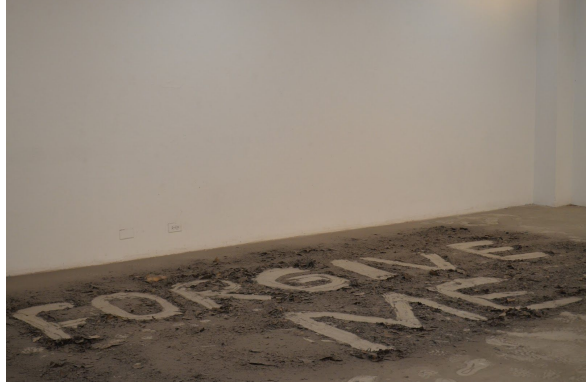


Performance "Forgive Me" 2019



Performance "Forgive Me" 2019

The moment the lights go off, everyone outside the window sees the reflection of their face. A directional flashlight is turned on from a corner of the room. The light moves in a searching motion. I am standing in the middle of the room wearing a mask that I call *Zorg*. It has two golden horns and pieces of mirrors throughout. The shape of the mask is of 3 tetrahedrons stacked next to each other.



Performance "Forgive Me" 2019



Performance "Forgive Me" 2019



Performance "Stranger in the Village" 2019

I continue to whip the ash and simultaneously try to avoid the searching flashlight. Each time the light hits the mask the room is illuminated with small circles of light. I stop moving, take off the mask, and kneel next to it like it was a shield. I set the mask on the floor and all the lights go off. Ashes in the air, the mask, and the whip on the ground are all that remain.

Forgive Me consists of an installation of ashes on the ground. There is a saying in Latin America, "Las palabras se las lleva el viento" meaning words are taken by the winds. This saying is asking for a call to action. Words fade but actions are permanent. In *Stranger in the Village*, I am referencing James Baldwin's essay of the same name. Baldwin speaks about his relationship with Christianity and writes that "other children, having been taught that the devil is a Black man, scream in genuine anguish as I approach."⁹ I try to establish the relationship between being Black, a demon and carnival culture and aesthetics in the Caribbean. In traditional Carnival, which is

⁹ James Baldwin. "Stranger in the Village" *Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2015.), 86

sometimes also referred to as *ole mas*, there are traditional carnival characters. One of them is called a Jab-jab, words that come from the French word *diable*, which means devil. According to Hollis Urban Liverpool, Carnival historian, the history of the Jab-jab traces back to slavery days.

He says:

“Before, whenever sugarcane fires broke out on an estate, the enslaved Africans were sent to put them out. After the Africans were freed 1838, according to 19th-century historian L.M. Fraser, they reenacted this event by making believe they were putting out fires. Fraser mentioned that in putting out the fires, a ritual developed:

The slaves on the surrounding properties were immediately mustered and marched to the spot, horns and shells were blown to collect them and the gangs were followed by the drivers cracking their whips and urging them with cries and blows to their work.”¹⁰

I consider the following works a three-part performance where each bleeds into one another. Part 1: *Epidermis Glistened like a Newly-blacked Boot*, Part 2: *Forgive Me*, and Part 3: *Stranger in the Village*. Each one of these works contends with stories that are close to each other. In *Epidermis Glistened like a Newly-blacked Boot*, I commit the act, the enslaver committed to slaves, upon myself. The audience, as spectators or participants, becomes implicated in the violent act. By picking up the whip and forcing everyone outside and also by appearance, I look and behave like a Jab-jab. By the time I begin the second performance, activate and write on the ashes, I ask my ancestors for forgiveness. I whip the words into the air for them to be taken by the wind. In *Stranger in the Village*, I become a demon and alien. The flashlight that follows me around in the room is meant to represent authority or some sort of policing. And at the end of the performance, I go to my knees and surrender.

Part of my intention with the performances is to antagonize the audience and create a power reversal. Make them witness my anger and witness the demon and the alien. I do not speak in the

¹⁰ Hollis Urban Liverpool. "Origins of Rituals and Customs in the Trinidad Carnival: African or European?" *TDR* (1988-) 42, no. 3 (1998): 24-37. Accessed May 10, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/1146677.

performances. I also look at people in the eye, push them if they are not moving, or confront and force them in an aggressive manner. The decisions behind just using my body, body gestures in a confrontational demeanor in these performances, come from an interview with James Baldwin and from a separate interview with Junot Diaz.

“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you”¹¹

“Silence as a method of survival because we have not undone the nightmares that we have inflicted in this world during this new world project.”¹²

Present

El Amarillo Representa el Oro

In 1833, the Emancipation Bill was presented in the United Kingdom and came into effect in August 1834, 150 years after Trinidad and Tobago declared Emancipation Day a national holiday. Up to this day, there are no monuments to victims of slavery erected on the island. National calendar holidays are celebrations that are usually declared by nation, state, or the system that is in power. If the power structure shifts to a different ideology, these intangible celebrations can be removed and forgotten. A monument, in contrast, has a more tangible presence, despite the fact that it could be removed or destroyed.

A few monuments in Trinidad and Tobago are in commemoration of athletes, musicians, or foreign icons. There are a couple of monuments to Christopher Columbus and Mahatma Gandhi, there is

¹¹ James Baldwin, Emile Capouya, Lorraine Hansbery, Nat Hentoff, Langston Hughes, and Alfred Kazin. "The Negro in American Culture." *CrossCurrents* 11, no. 3 (1961): 205-24. Accessed May 10, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24456864.

¹² “Junot Díaz - Radical Hope Is Our Best Weapon.” The On Being Project, September 14, 2017. <https://onbeing.org/programs/junot-diaz-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon-sep2017/>

one to the retired cricket player Brian Lara and a park called *Memorial Park*, that has a cenotaph in the middle in commemoration to the Trinitobagonians that died in the First and Second World War. There is a three dimensional mural outside the House of Parliament that shows the different “peoples”¹³ of Trinidad and Tobago. Not too far away in a very similar finish, there is another mural to all the Athletes who have won any medals in the Olympic games.

The demographics of the island, according to the Central Intelligence Agency in 2011, is made up of: *East Indian 35.4%, African descent 34.2%, mixed - other 15.3%, mixed - African/East Indian 7.7%, other 1.3%, unspecified 6.2%*¹⁴. These numbers along with our colonial and post-colonial history, are what make up a big part of the racial dynamics on the island. The two predominant political parties in the country, UNC (United National Congress) and PNM (People’s National Movement) are considered, in common language, the “Indian” and “Black” political parties. Whenever one of these parties is in power, it could be said that one group benefits more than the other. The benefits come in many different forms, from jobs in government, to where funding of the national budget gets allocated. All these benefits are hidden behind the motto and belief that it is for the betterment of the nation. It is my belief that a monument to either Indian indenture or to African slavery would be considered more of a political move rather than a commemoration. Two of the biggest ethnic groups, East Indian and African descent, have always fought for the spotlight in regards to whose history is more important. I think this to be one of the reasons there are no monuments to victims of slavery in Trinidad and Tobago even though we were the first country to declare Emancipation Day a national holiday.

I consider the lack of a monument, and only a calendar holiday, as a commemoration of a precarious position to take, even though my position is anti-monument. My position leans towards

¹³ Eric Eustace Williams. *History of the People of Trinidad & Tobago*. Brooklyn, NY: A & B Publ., 2002.

¹⁴ “The World Factbook: Trinidad and Tobago.” Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, February 1, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/td.html#field-anchor-people-and-society-ethnic-groups>.

education. Telling of the stories and histories of folks who were oppressed. The physical, tangible, and material presence of a monument does not share the relevant information.



Video "El Amarillo Representa el Oro"

In the video work *El Amarillo Representa el Oro*, I cover myself in raw palm oil and gold glitter on the north coast of Trinidad. I use myself and my body as a temporary monument. I stare towards the sea while the palm oil burns my eyes. The glitter glistens as the sun hits my body. The time in the video is slowed down -3x but the sound of the sea remains in real-time. In the video, I can be seen slowly breathing in and out. In a way similar to the artwork *Elizabeth / elizabeth*, I use the glitter to represent gold. I use gold glitter to make reference to a common description in South America and the Caribbean about the meaning of the colors of the flag. Usually, the color yellow represents the gold or the wealth of the country.

In the video, I am trying to create an ephemeral monument. *El Amarillo Representa el Oro* is an intangible monument and only seen once the video is projected. The size of the projection is to be 12ft or more in height in order to create a monumental view, so the viewer must always look up at the video.



Video “*El Amarillo Representa el Oro*”

Cutlass in Hand

Cutlass In Hand is a performance that partly speaks about my relationship to Trinidad orishas, Santeria, and obeah and the rituals that form part of the Yoruba religion. Yoruba religion is the base for many of the religions that are now part of the African diaspora in the Americas. Throughout my life, I have been exposed to these religions, rituals, and beliefs through my family.

“The African Cultural heritage has been preserved in the island up until this day thanks to the oral tradition passed down to us by those of Afro-Cuban gatekeepers who have been our parents, grandparents, and

great grand-parents; rituals are the communication vessels with our origins.”¹⁵

Pedro Perez Sarduy's text explains specifically the example of Cuba, but this is the case for many Caribbean families of African descent. In a similar way these stories, traditions, and rituals were passed down to my family. Neither my grandmother or my mother were initiated into any of these religions, but they were both practitioners. My connection with African spirituality comes from the maternal side of my family. Yoruba religion is something that has always surrounded me in noticeable ways and in other clandestine instances.

I do not call these rituals *performances*. There are certain parts of the research and lived experience that has always found its way to my practice. But specific rituals, which entail offerings and a certain way of living, are very separate from my art practice. I grew up seeing and doing certain rituals with my mother. Where they came from or why we did them was never explained to me. We spoke about our dreams and the symbolism that appeared in them, such as snakes, the paths and spaces we walked through, or the people that were in them.

We placed pumpkins or other types of fruits and plants around the house so they could absorb negative energies. For *La Noche de San Juan* we used to tell each other our future and luck. A lot of these traditions, histories, and practices have been erased and continue to be erased by more dominant, suppressive, and popular beliefs and religions. I realized that many of the things that I used to do with my mother or in my home were not common practice in other people's houses.

In the performance *Cutlass in Hand*, I walk around with my cutlass telling stories about colonialism and slavery. I speak about the British colonial slave registry and why my family's last name is there. I talk about my effort to track my family tree to see if I can prove if the story is indeed how it's

¹⁵Pedro Perez Sarduy. “In Living Memory: The Commemoration of Slavery in Cuba” *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas, and Europe*. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002.), 66

been told, and how in all my attempts I have failed to find adequate material. A lot of documents regarding my family's heritage do not exist. There is nothing recorded on paper. I begin to talk about the erasure of histories, identities, and traditions. I talk about the cutlass being used to cut sugar cane. I swing the cutlass so everyone can hear the sound of how it cuts through the air. I talk about Yoruba religion and offerings for Oshun and Ogun... this is where the performance ends. Afterward, I make offerings to Ogun.



Performance "Cutlass in Hand" 2019

Oshun and Ogun are both Yoruba deities. Oshun is the African goddess of beauty, love, prosperity, and fertility. She is also the queen of the rivers. The colors associated with her are usually gold, yellow, and ochre. Her favorite foods are honey, sweet bread, oranges, sweet potatoes, or pumpkins.

Anytime we are giving her honey as an offering we have to make sure to taste it before. On the other hand, Ogun is the African god of war and iron. The colors associated with him are green and black. Usually, offerings to Ogun require killing a living animal and offering the meat, but there are other things that can be offered to him like grapes, rum, and pomegranates.



Performance "Cutlass in Hand" 2019

My intention with the performance of *Cutlass in Hand* is to bridge my art practice and part of my beliefs. Different from other works like *OYÁ-9493*, where I try to bring certain aspects, symbolism, and aesthetics of Yoruba religion, in *Cutlass in Hand* I decide to have the performance and the ritual side by side. I share part of my family history with the audience in a way where they just become listeners. The audience does not participate in the ritual. I gather everyone in the middle of the room and surround them

in a circle of salt to protect them from the negative energy that might come as a consequence of performing the rituals.



Performance "Cutlass in Hand" 2019

The Impossibility

I have used palm oil in several works. Initially, my research was interested in the plants that were brought to the Americas from West Africa and how they were commodified both historically and in the present. *In Epidermis glistened like a newly-blacked boot* and *El Amarillo Representa el Oro* I cover my body with palm oil. In works prior to these, I was using it to create text or maps. I also began to observe what my body looks like when it is fully covered with it. It seemed the most obvious next step was to cast my body with the mixture of palm oil, gunpowder, and lemons. As I cast my own face and other pieces of my body, I took notice of how each one of these cast figures melted and slowly lost their identity. They eventually became a puddle of the palm oil mixture.



Palm oil cast of my hand

As the casts melted and disappeared, I began to think about the work of Kerry James Marshall and his efforts to include the Black figure into the western canon of painting.

“His ambition has always been to achieve expertise and proficiency to match the Old Masters whose paintings hang on museum walls, for his paintings to pass muster alongside the revered classics that make up the canon – because that, precisely, was the only way to contest the canon, to rewrite the master narrative of Western art history and pay attention to black subjects who were mostly marginalized or invisible.”¹⁶

There is an amazing amount of labour required to create this “counter archive”, and persistence and resilience required to make it noticeable and keep it visible. Gert Oostindie, in his essay *Stony Regret*

¹⁶ Gabriel Coxhead. “An Interview with Kerry James Marshall.” *Apollo Magazine*, December 3, 2019. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/kerry-james-marshall-interview/>

and Pledges for the Future states, “This history will never be over, it can always be repeated; we must be vigilant.”¹⁷ I am reminded of the words of Derek Walcott as I think about my interest in the lack of monuments to victims of slavery in Trinidad and Tobago.

“We had no such erection above our colonial wharves...
We think of the past
As better forgotten than fixed with stoney regret”¹⁸

Derek Walcott’s poem *Omeros 191* makes allusion to the shame that many Caribbean and Latin American countries have in regard to the history of enslaved Africans. The ideas of historians, writers, and artists, moved me to make molds and casts of myself and other Black folks that I have met during my time in Virginia. I view the history of slavery as an overarching umbrella that has many different chapters and stories in many different countries, but they have similarities and differences. Some of these differences and similarities have to do with the development of each nation. While making my work I think about Virginia and the United States, about Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. I contemplate slavery and how the sale of enslaved Africans was a big business. Free labor helped to build a nation--picking cotton, working on sugar and banana plantations, building architecture.

While walking in Richmond, I started picking up bricks to use as a base to place casts of my melting palm oil mixture bodies. Playing with the idea of creating a monument that melts over a brick, a brick that is such an important component of a building, I began to research the free labor behind architecture. One of the first articles that caught my attention was the construction of the University of Virginia.

¹⁷Gert Oostindie. *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002.), 11

¹⁸Derek Walcott. *Omeros*. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990.) 191



Studio Images: Brick collection, Palm oil brick, Palm oil leg.

“On October 7, 1817, officials authorized the hiring of additional laborers, including slaves, to begin construction of the University. According to Neale, these men hauled timber to construction sites on Grounds, where they cut and nailed it. They also molded and fired bricks and used them to build the University's first buildings and walls. In an effort at cost-cutting, most of these slaves at the University were hired from local owners, who were paid a set annual amount per slave and who expected their "property" to be returned reasonably well clothed.”¹⁹

The history of brick in the US began around the 1600s in Virginia, where slaves were forced to harvest clay from the river to prepare material for brick making. A quarterly published by the Division of Mineral Resources, mentions the third president of the United States Thomas Jefferson’s plantation house in Monticello Virginia.

“From January 1793 through the summer of 1794, Jefferson's slaves made brick, so many that in a letter to George Wythe in October 1799, Jefferson said that "We are now living in a brick kiln.... One hundred

¹⁹ Brendan Wolfe. “Unearthing Slavery at the University of Virginia: Recent Discoveries Raise New Questions about the Past.” Virginia Magazine. Accessed May 11, 2020. https://uvamagazine.org/articles/unearthing_slavery_at_the_university_of_virginia.

thousand bricks were produced in 1773-1774. Brodie (1974) notes that during the first two years of his marriage (1772-1773), Jefferson's slaves molded and fired thousands of bricks at Monticello.”²⁰

Based on the research and the process of making palm oil bodies, I decided to create a monument constructed of palm oil body parts, one where they would lay one on top of another to impart the sense of a pile of bodies. The casts sit on top of 1400 bricks collected in Richmond, Virginia. The work is activated through a performance where I build a base out of the Richmond bricks and then begin to pile the body parts made of palm oil, gunpowder, and lemon juice. I use a heat gun to adhere the cast body parts to one another. The palm oil casts melt slowly, run through the bricks, and onto the ground. The only way to keep the monument from disappearing is to collect the palm oil mixture, recast the body parts, and continually replace the cast bodies on top of the brick structure. The only way to remain visible is through persistence and resilience. The concept of labor in the creation of the work is articulated in different phases:

A - Preface: Collecting the bricks. Casting the palm oil body of different Black folks. Casting bricks out of palm oil.

B - Performance: Arranging the bricks for the base of the monument. Building the palm oil monument.

C - In progress: Collecting, recasting, and reassembling the monument as it melts daily.

Themes of resilience, persistence, erasure, invisibility, and ephemerality, are embedded in each of the above-mentioned phases in differing capacities. For example, the moment I stop collecting and recasting the palm oil, the monument will melt and disappear. The only thing that will remain on display is a cube of bricks drenched in palm oil. Resilience and persistence are embedded in the action in the performance.

²⁰ Palmer C Sweet. “History of the Brick in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.” Dept of Mines Minerals and Energy, August 1998. <https://www.dmme.virginia.gov/>.

Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon (V1- V2 -V3)

Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon was created as an extension of the research done for *The Impossibility* and focuses on the idea of labor and impermanence. Each of the versions has differing intentions and display mechanisms involving photography, video, and performance.



Performance “Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon” - Me building the foundation of the wall

In Version1 (V1), I activate the material through a performance where I build the foundation of the wall and then select a person from the audience to complete the building of the wall. The wall must be constructed in its entirety by one person. The individual selected to build must be a white male. If they refuse to build the wall, they have to leave the performance space. I continue the selection process until a white man agrees to construct the wall. Building the wall can take up to 5 hours. If they refuse to leave the performance is shut down. If they leave, I push and make the wall collapse so whoever agrees to build the wall next must rebuild from scratch. If the wall gets completed, the person who accomplished the building of the wall along with audience members in the room push the wall down together. The final artwork

version is a collapsed wall, no matter at what stage performance ended. The wall is never meant to remain standing.

In Version2 (V2), the wall is assembled by me in a live performance. This work can be displayed in a gallery space or it can be installed in an exterior location. In Version3 (V3), the location has more significance, such as Virginia's African Burial Grounds, Reconciliation Triangle, or Richmond's Slave Trail. The ephemeral memorial is constructed by me to later be dismantled.



Performance "Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon"



Performance "Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon" - White man builds the wall while everyone else spectates



"Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon" - collapsed wall

The artwork in Version1 (V1) is located in the interaction between the audience and me. The building of the wall becomes a mechanism to speak about ideas of free labor (emotional and physical), capitalism, and the sharing of labor. The wall and the construction of it serve as a metaphor for the cities and nations that were built by enslaved Africans and the dysfunction of the capitalist system. I repeatedly push down the incomplete wall until it gets fully built as an analogy to the ongoing collapse and reconstruction of capitalism, over its very debris. Capitalism is driven by a long history of gentrification, racism, and exploitation. Labour, precarity, and death have always been at our doorstep.

In (V2) and (V3) of *Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon*, the wall acts as an ephemeral monument, something that gets built and only lasts for a short period. It is interesting to think about this wall as a monument. Its size is not grand and it gets dismantled. It does not have any human figure representing something specific. Its existence in an exterior space or a specific location does not guarantee its success as a monument. It is a way for me to create my own monument to my ancestors.



“Bricks, Palm Oil, Gunpowder, and Lemon”

At the completion of both works, *The Impossibility*, and *Bricks, Palm oil, Gunpowder, and Lemons*, I clean the bricks and slowly return them to the different locations where I picked them up. Despite being cleaned, all the bricks will be stained with palm oil. It is a way to create a visible/invisible memorial.

Future

OYA-9394

In exploring a collection of ideas that involve the present, past, and future, I read Octavia Butler's Parables series (*Parables of the Sower* and *Parables of the Talents*). The books begin describing the near future in 2024, one very close to the present moment. Both books speak about a dystopian future that recycles and creates new methods of oppression based on their current reality. The main character Lauren Oya Olamina says "As far as I'm concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things leftover from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us."²¹ In Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake On Blackness and Being*, she says "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."²² If we were to think about these two statements in relation to time, Sharpe's words are located in the present while looking into the past, while Butler's words are located in a nearby future while looking into the present and the past.

The concept for OYA-9394 began with me reflecting on the books mentioned above and my current reality as a Black man. I am continually thinking about a space where I can live without my body being in a constant state of threat. Sun Ra, like many other Afrofuturists, mentions space as being the place where Black people must go in order to escape systems of oppression and violence. As I continue to reflect on Afrofuturism and alternative futures, what keeps coming to mind is the development of space(s)

²¹Octavia E Butler.. *Parable of the Sower*. Read by Lynne Thigpen. Recorded books, 2009

²² Christina Elizabeth Sharpe,. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2016.), 9

that are inclusive, the destruction or restructuring of capitalism, and the decolonization and unlearning of many beliefs that have brought us to where we are today. Many times, I have tried to imagine what the world would look like without capitalism... and even today I have difficulty envisioning what that might be. Writer and cultural theorist Mark Fisher calls this *Capitalism Realism*, which is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."²³ As I look at my past and my present I cannot think about utopian futures.



Walking in OYA-9394 in the Streets of Richmond, Virginia.

The OYA- 9394 suit makes me hyper-visible. When I am without it, I adopt ways of surviving and blending in. I constantly question the way I dress, the way I speak, and the words that come out of my mouth. Focusing on the idea of a dystopian future, I consider the OYA suit a type of armor, a protective suit made with materials that I can find--made with the technology available on earth. I do not have the means to leave Earth but others do. I think about space exploration as something that is meant to benefit

²³ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010.), 2

mostly White folks--people with wealth, and power. But the day they depart Earth there will not be much left for me here. I will need to develop further methods of survival.

The *OYA- 9394* spacesuit is made of material that I can purchase along with material that I have found. I fashioned the suit from 3 chemical-resistant overalls, an acrylic dome as a helmet, and a waterproof backpack. The chemical suits, covered in black glitter, make me glow when illuminated by the sun. For shoes, I wear a pair of Nike AIR MAX 720 SATRN. Cricket gear covers my hands and legs. Pieces of dry palm, wooden beads, thread, and ac aluminum tape adorn the suits to represent OYA. The name *OYA-9394* is the combination of the Yoruba Orisha Oya. Judika Illes describes OYA in the Encyclopedia of Spirits:

“Oya is the woman warrior orisha of storms, winds, and hurricanes. The winds she raises in West Africa manifest as hurricanes in the Caribbean. Oya presides over healing and necromantic divination... Oya protects against lightning, electrocution, hurricanes, tornadoes, and storms. She heals lung diseases.”²⁴

The numbers that succeed Oya’s name are meant to represent a date in the calendar. September 3rd, 1994 was the date my younger brother passed away in a drowning accident. This accidental death is acknowledged by the visible collection of my breath, highlighted by the cloud of vapor which covers the spacesuit helmet when worn. *OYA-9394* is activated while I move through my everyday life, during mundane activities such as going to the supermarket, walking in the park, or sitting by the river.

²⁴ Judika, Illes. *Encyclopedia of Spirits: The Ultimate Guide to the Magic of Fairies, Genies, Demons, Ghosts, Gods & Goddesses*. (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2010.), 814



Standing in front of my apartment in OYA-9394. Richmond, Virginia.



Picking up bricks in OYA-9394. Richmond, Virginia.

Conclusion

I present different ways of viewing the outcome of stories embedded in the works I created between 2018-2020. No matter if the stories are set in the past or the present, I continuously think about what could be or might have been an alternative outcome. I make work as a means of coping with the thought of never being able to trace my lineage. Rinaldo Walcott speaks of making work about the Middle Passage and filling in the knowledge gap in his essay “Middle Passage: In the Absence of Detail, Presenting and Representing a Historical Void”:

“My argument requires us to think differently about the cultural archive, and about what Black artists imagining and representing the Middle Passage might and can bring to fill the intentional void that makes Black people an absented presence in the modern.”²⁵

Making the work drives me to investigate the past and what my ancestors lived through to an even greater extent. It also motivates me to surmise how we can dismantle and decolonize the current power systems. In her “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto”²⁶ Martine Syms clarifies ways of thinking about the future without entering the imaginary realm. I desire that my present and future work reflect on the past, the present, and possible future imagining outcomes that will change our current circumstances. Before me, my ancestors and lineage worked for me to have access to certain privileges and space to be heard. I intend to broaden that space, through my practice and activism, for the ones who come after me.

²⁵ Rinaldo Walcott. "Middle Passage: In the Absence of Detail, Presenting and Representing a Historical Void." *Kronos*, no. 44 (2018), 68

²⁶ Martine Syms, “The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” Rhizome, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/>.

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