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ROCK, SOIL, CLAY, AND SEEDLING: REIMAGINING LANDSCAPES AS ECOLOGIES OF JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY ART BY OTOBONG NKANGA, DINEO SESHEE BOPAPE, JADE MONTSERRAT, AND JACKIE SUMELL

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Rock, Soil, Clay, and Seedling:

Reimagining Landscapes as Ecologies of Justice in Contemporary Art by Otobong Nkanga, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Jade Montserrat, and jackie sumell

Alexandra Moore

This dissertation analyzes artworks by contemporary artists Otobong Nkanga, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Jade Montserrat, and jackie sumell that use the materiality of the earth—rocks, soil, clay, and vegetation—to explore the intertwining of destruction of ecosystems and violence against humans. I situate these works within the racial Capitalocene and an emerging discourse of decolonial geopoetics. To do so, I consider them in contrast to European landscape traditions of representation that went hand-in hand with capitalist and colonialist perceptions of land as an alienable resource and reinforced racial hierarchies. Chapters cover Nkanga's investigations of the ruins of colonial mining practices in Tsumeb, Namibia; Bopape's remembering of colonial violence and South African Pan-Africanism through soil installations; Montserrat's material explorations of the politics of belonging and imperial amnesia in England; and sumell's use of gardening as a tool towards prison abolition in the United States. I argue that the artworks studied act at the interface between human and environment, addressing the histories and presents of colonialism, extractivism, and incarceration, and drawing attention to the fundamental interconnectedness of

humans and the complex network of liveliness that is land. Further, I read the care for and acknowledgement of interdependence with other beings—both human and not—that these artists enact as a strategy for envisioning livable futures beyond the structures of the racial Capitalocene.

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Introduction

In a 2018 special issue of *Third Text* titled "Wretched Earth," Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh connected Frantz Fanon's insights about the importance of land in colonial ideology and anticolonial struggle to the trajectory of ecological devastation in colonized spaces. They wrote: "Landscapes and vegetation are not simply the backdrop against which violence and dispossession unfold, but are mobilized as the very medium of violence."[1] Gray and Sheikh continue:

> In order to fully grasp the violence of colonialism upon its subjects—those who have historically been deemed "less-than-human" or "not-quite-human" and denied access to "human rights"—it is necessary to also address the violence carried out upon the landscape.[2]

Informed by Gray and Sheikh, as well as a growing body of literature that argues that the roots of the climate crisis extend back to the 1400s and the beginning of both the slave trade and European colonial interests in Africa and the Americas, this dissertation analyzes several artistic projects that use the materiality of the earth—rocks, soil, clay, and vegetation—to explore the intertwining of destruction of ecosystems and violence against humans.[3] Looking at different geopolitical settings,

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[1] Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, "The Wretched Earth," *Third Text* 32, no. 2–3 (May 4, 2018): 164, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1483881.

[2] Gray and Sheikh, 164.

[3] A partial list of such scholarship includes Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); T. J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/2798/Beyond-the-Worlds-EndArts-of-Living-at-the; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017); T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017); Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*

the artists Otobong Nkanga, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Jade Montserrat, and jackie sumell examine the consequences of being removed from the land as well as the multiplicity of ways that access to land is a form of power intertwined with racial discourses. In their practices, these artists are all invested in healing the wounds of these removals and destructions, whether through singing to an abandoned mine, burning sage over adobe brick altars, playing on a hillside with wet clay, or using a garden to grow friendships across prison walls. In my research into these art practices, I have been asking several intersecting questions: What strategies are Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat, and sumell using to reexamine the histories of colonialism and racial capitalism that have brought us into the present? What do these artworks illuminate about the relationship between different understandings and representations of land and the production of racial hierarchies? What different ways of knowing and experiencing land do these artists enact or invite through their artworks? And, lastly, what potential futures are these artists inviting us into? In answering these questions, I contend that Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat, and sumell intervene in the relationship between representation and possession historically established through European landscape imagery. I argue that the artworks studied act at the interface between human and environment, addressing the histories and presents of colonialism, extractivism, and incarceration, and drawing attention to the fundamental interconnectedness of humans and the complex network of liveliness

16, no. 4 (December 20, 2017): 761–80; T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

that is land. Further, I read the care for and acknowledgment of interdependence with other beings—both human and not—that these artists enact as as a strategy for livable futures beyond the structures of the racial Capitalocene.

Decolonial Geopoetics within the Racial Capitalocene

In their art practices, Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat, and sumell explore the intersection of land, race, and colonialism. My analytical approach to their artworks is informed by François Vergès's conception of the "racial Capitolocene."[4] The racial Capitalocene is Vergès's response to the prevalent discourse of the "Anthropocene." The geologists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer are generally credited with introducing the term independent of each other. The term highlights the impact of humans on the planet but has been criticized for overly flattening the responsibility to humanity in general. The geographer Angela Last summarizes: "Climate change and Anthropocene discourse have been criticized for underrepresenting the neo-colonial element of the distribution of both human impact and intervention."[5] Vergès's naming of the racial Capitalocene integrates the ways that racial capitalism is implicated in the ongoing processes of ecological devastation.[6] Her framing builds from the analysis of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* in which—while writing a critique of Marxism that centers the history of Black revolt—he argues that ideas of racial difference informed European feudalism and the forms of capitalism that emerged

[4] Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene."
[5] Angela Last, "We Are the World? Anthropocene Cultural Production between Geopoetics and Geopolitics," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 2–3 (2017): 149, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415598626.
[6] Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene."

from it. Robinson makes the centrality of racial thinking within capitalism explicit by using the term "racial capitalism." As Ruth Wilson Gilmore succinctly states, "Capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it."[7] Using "racial Capitalocene" to complicate "Anthropocene" emphasizes "the fact that destruction in the colonial era becomes visible in the postcolonial era."[8] The language argues that rather than a new "crisis" precipitated in recent decades, the current forms of environmental unraveling (wildfires, floods, hurricanes, droughts etc.) are the consequences of a mercenary attitude toward the world exemplified by and reproduced through processes of colonization, enslavement, and genocide. It also draws attention to the ongoing uneven distribution of exposure to climate disasters, environmental toxicity, and loss of home along the lines of difference (race, gender, class, nation, etc).

I contend that the artworks of Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat and sumell all represent and engage land in a way that draws out the colonial, racist, and capitalist roots of environmental destruction. In doing this, the artworks can be usefully understood as sites of decolonial geopoetics. I take the term *geopoetics* from the emerging discourse of climate geopoetics in geography and literary theory. Scottish poet Kenneth White is generally credited with first using the term.[9] However, Last

[7] *Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore* (Antipode Foundation, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKrJI.
[8] Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," 77.
[9] Erin Magrane, "Climate Geopoetics (the Earth Is a Composted Poem)," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 1 (March 2021): 4–160, https://doi-org.oca.ucsc.edu/10.1177/2043820620908390.

points out the "quasi-colonial, masculinist rhetoric" in White's writing.[10] By contrast, in her close reading of Guadeloupian writer Daniel Maximin's *Les Fruits du Cyclone: Une Geopoetique de la Caraïbe*, Last defines Maximin's use of the term:

> Geopoetics appear as a poetics that takes geographical features and geophysical forces seriously as an element of geopolitics, while seeking to constructively reinscribe them as a means to counter imperialist aspirations and hegemonic worldviews. In short, they represent a materialist, decolonial process of rewriting geopolitics.[11]

Last finds geopoetics useful as a potential point of dialogue between postcolonial critiques of universalizing discourses of "nature" and scholars interested in "socio-material cultural practices."[12] Joshua Bennet defines an explicitly Black geopoetics as "a poetics of ground, a poetry of mud, of earth….What sort of poetics rises to the fore when home is defined by an ongoing antagonism?"[13] This definition resists idealizing the ecological and makes space for engagements with place, land, and home that acknowledge loss, violence, and mourning. As Filipa Cesar writes in an article on the intersection between Guinean anti-colonial leader Amílcar Cabral's agronomy texts and his political writings, "The geological is not separated from human history, the soil is not inert and static 'ground' subjected to human agency, but rather has a dynamic relation to human social structures."[14] I am interested in decolonial geopoetics as a frame for grouping creative engagements with the material

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[10] Angela Last, "Fruit of the Cyclone: Undoing Geopolitics through Geopoetics," *Geoforum* 64 (August 1, 2015): 57, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.05.019.
[11] Last, 57.
[12] Last, 56–57.
[13] Joshua Bennett, "Revising 'The Waste Land': Black Antipastoral and the End of the World," *The Paris Review* (blog), January 8, 2018, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/01/08/revising-wasteland-black-antipastoral-end-world/.
[14] Filipa César, "Meteorisations: Reading Amílcar Cabral's Agronomy of Liberation," *Third Text* 32, no. 2–3 (2018): 255, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1492073.

intersection of human and nonhuman lifeworlds that infuse the geological with the political and dismantle colonial epistemologies.[15] To think through how the geopoetics of these artworks confront the racial Capitalocene, I consider how they differ from and/or critique European landscape traditions of representation that went hand-in hand with capitalist and colonialist perceptions of land as an object or resource.

Landscapes and Visual Studies

There is a well-established critical examination of landscapes within the field of visual studies. As the geographer Denis Cosgrove states, the term *landscape* refers to both a material "blend of land and life" and a pictorial apprehension of a space.[16] This, he notes, offers the potential to "exploit the ambiguities embedded in landscape, as dwelling and picture."[17] Along similar lines, the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell argues in his nine theses on landscape that: "landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other….It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified."[18] Both scholars find the term *landscape* useful as a tool for exploring relationships between humans and land, via the interaction between lived experience and representations of space. Continuing this

[15] Bennett, "Revising 'The Waste Land'"; Last, "Fruit of the Cyclone."
[16] Denis Cosgrove, "Modernity, Community and the Landscape Idea," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 1–2 (July 1, 2006): 50, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183506062992.
[17] Cosgrove, 64.
[18] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.

conversation on the conceptual potentials of the term, in 2007 Rachel DeLue and James Elkins edited *Landscape Theory*, which included a lengthy seminar-style conversation between art historians, geographers, writers, and practitioners.[19] And in a 2011 journal article on feminist landscapes, Jill Casid presented her own eleven theses on landscape, thinking about landscape as it moves between noun and verb, representation and production, drawing attention to the ongoing relationship between representations of terrain and the continued becoming of "relations of ground to figure, the potentials of bodies, and the interrelations of humans, animals, plants, and what we call the 'environment.'"[20] This emphasis on relationships, makes it a useful medium for thinking through the socioecological crisis of climate breakdown and, as T. J. Demos frames it, "opening up new worldings of justice-based ecologies."[21]

In addition to being a conceptually generative term because of its ambiguity and connectivity, landscape is also an active site of research in art history and visual studies because of the long and influential history of the European landscape tradition. In "Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea," Cosgrove emphasizes that landscape within this tradition is a "way of seeing" that "arose initially out of renaissance humanism."[22] Cosgrove argues that the development of perspective as a visual tool in the fifteenth century was part of a

[19] Rachel Z. DeLue and James Elkins, eds., *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
[20] Jill H. Casid, "Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the Performative," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 98, https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2011.563038.
[21] Demos, *Beyond the World's End*, 20.
[22] Denis Cosgrove, "Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10, no. 1 (1985): 46, https://doi.org/10.2307/622249.

larger project of mercantile surveying and assessing the world for management and possession. He states that through perspective, "visually space is rendered the property of the individual detached observer, from whose divine location it is a dependent, appropriated object."[23] He goes on to note that this visual sense of power "very frequently complemented a very real power and control over fields and farms on the part of patrons and owners of landscape paintings."[24] Also looking to the early Renaissance and the city-state model of governance, Malcolm Andrews claims that, "landscape, as a separate genre, emerges as this sense of a shared interest between town and country comes under pressure, as early urban-centred capitalism develops new relations with land and endows it with exchange value."[25] Just as Cosgrove argues that the development of perspective was key to the establishment of land as property, Ann Bermingham suggests that the development of garden conversation pieces and the picturesque in England in the eighteenth century defined and produced the land as an economic and political resource.[26]

These understandings of landscape imagery have proved particularly productive for scholars dissecting the representational and managerial strategies of colonialism.[27] Speaking of imperialism broadly, Mitchell asserts that landscape

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[23] Cosgrove, 49.
[24] Cosgrove, 55.
[25] Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155.
[26] Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
[27] It would be worthwhile to look more closely at the development of visual discourses that turn land into property alongside the legal and political processes of theft that Robert Nichols argues created land as property in settler colonial settings. See Robert Nichols, "Theft Is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 3–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717701709.

should be understood as a "dreamwork" of imperialism that reveals both "utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance."[28] Looking at the Caribbean as one case study, in *Sowing Empire* Jill Casid analyzes French and British colonial practices of transplanting botanical specimens in the Caribbean, which transformed both metropoles and colonies, as well as the two imperial powers' different discourses for representing and celebrating their possessions.[29] In *Eye on the Tropics*, Krista Thompson traces the development of the imperial picturesque in Jamaica and the Bahamas as well as the colonial and corporate "imaging of the islands as tropical and picturesque tourist destinations."[30] Building off these two studies, Charmaine Nelson has traced the way that literary, cartographic, and painting discourses (including the picturesque) worked together to sanitize and naturalize the brutality of the plantation regime in colonial Jamaica.[31] Nelson's research attempts to "unbind" the "assumed linearity of seeing, knowing, and possessing" that colonial landscapes encapsulated.[32] More recently, in *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism*, Samantha Noël looks at the appropriation of tropicality by Black artists' of the Caribbean and United States, arguing that the tropical aesthetics mobilized by Wilfredo Lam, Aaron Douglas and

[28] Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 10.
[29] Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
[30] Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.
[31] Charmaine Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 195–216.
[32] Nelson, 8.

others were a mode of expressing Pan-Africanism and a complex claim of belonging to both the diaspora and the land they inhabited.[33]

Another branch of related research has looked at the relationship between aestheticization of land and colonial processes of extraction. For example, Casid refers to the French implementation of technology and the transplanting of plants to Saint-Domingue as "the colonial landscape machine" emphasizing the transformation of the land into an industrial and capitalist site of extraction.[34] Martin Berger argues in his work on whiteness and photographs of Yosemite that images produced celebrating the majesty of the soon-to-be national park were also in service of an extractive relationship to the land, and Sasha Scott has convincingly argued that Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of Hawai'i were successfully appropriated by the Hawaiian Pineapple Company to promote a vision of the then territory as an exotic commodity, open to consumption by mainland Americans.[35]

Contemporary artists have been leading the way in interrogating and unpacking the connections between historical modes of seeing and contemporary realities.[36] Within this orientation, the language of landscape has been taken up by

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[33] Samantha A. Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
[34] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 39.
[35] Martin A. Berger, "Landscape Photography and the White Gaze," in *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 43–80; Sascha T. Scott, "Georgia O'Keeffe's Hawai'i?," *American Art* 34, no. 2 (2020): 26–53, https://doi.org/10.1086/710471.
[36] This can be seen in the catalogues of international exhibitions over the last several years. For example: Koyo Kouoh and Woodrow Kernohan, eds., *EVA International 2016 - Still (the) Barbarians* (Limerick: EVA International, 2016); Katerina Gregos and Vincent Meessen, eds., *Personne et Les Autres: Vincent Meessen & Guests* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2015); Okwui Enwezor, ed., *All the*

several scholars looking at art as a way for thinking more specifically about the role of land in contemporary politics as well as the urgencies of climate justice.[37] For example, in *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* Kate Morris situates contemporary Indigenous representations of land "within a larger discourse of Indigenous visual sovereignty" and in relation to Indigenous activism.[38] The anthology *Critical Landscapes*, edited by Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson, brings together scholarship on art practices internationally that engage the materials, uses, and meanings of land.[39] Another relevant recent collection is *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* edited by T.J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott and Subhankar Banerjee which, though not focused on landscapes explicitly, brings together creative responses to climate change

Worlds Futures: La Biennale de Venizia, 56th Edition, Short Guide (Venice, Italy: Marsilio Editori, 2015).

[37] There is also a significant group of artists and scholars critically engaging with the history and potentials of mapping and counter-mapping practices. These efforts are related to but formally and conceptually distinct from the affective and material practices of the landscape that I am researching, Examples of such practices include: Forensic Architecture, ed., *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014); Nabil Ahmed, "Environmental Violence: Land Rights: Counter-Mapping West Papua," *Continent* 4, no. 4 (2015), https://continentcontinent.cc/archives/issues/issue-4-4-2015/land-rights-counter-mapping-west-papua; Dallas Hunt and Shaun A. Stevenson, "Decolonizing Geographies of Power: Indigenous Digital Counter-Mapping Practices on Turtle Island," *Settler Colonial Studies* 7, no. 3 (2017): 372–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2016.1186311; Paulo Tavares, "In The Forest Ruins," December 2016, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68688/in-the-forest-ruins/; Eyal Weizman, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, in association with Cabinet Books, Brooklyn, 2015).

[38] Kate Morris, *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 3.

[39] Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten Swenson, eds., *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, *Critical Landscapes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

through an interdisciplinary lens and contains several chapters that address ideologies of land.[40]

Acknowledging the oppressive histories of landscapes, Daniella Rose King and Jade Montserrat ask, "Can landscapes become spaces for tilling, propagating, and harvesting identities that are inclusive and in a state of renewal and growth?"[41] In this dissertation I respond to that question in the affirmative, showing how the art practices of Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat, and sumell provide models for inclusive and life-oriented landscapes. Rather than necessarily a vision of separation or domination, I define landscape as an interface: a place where the relationship between self and place is articulated and manipulated by the artist. I take the term interface from Elizabeth Grosz's articulation of the relationship between bodies and cities: "a model based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other."[42] Both body and land affect and contribute to each other, making the point of distinction unclear. The works I discuss function as landscapes in this sense because they are places where the interrelationship of human and land is explicitly engaged and worked through. Further, in contrast to thinking of land as an alienable form of property, these artworks invite an understanding of land that is more in line with Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee) and Amanda R. Tachine's (Diné)

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[40] T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee, *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York: Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429321108.
[41] Daniella Rose King and Jade Montserrat, "(Some Possibilities of) Rural Belongings," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 3 (September 2, 2018): 263, https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2018.1540219.
[42] Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 229.

definition of land as "a multidimensional living entity that we engage through our senses."[43] Landscape as interface explores the terms and textures of this engagement.

Landscapes, Race, and Climate Justice

One aspect of landscape discourses that is particularly important to this dissertation is the way that landscapes have been produced through and in relationship to ideas of race. As many scholars have elucidated, ideas justifying colonial possession of territory often relied on defining the difference between colonists and indigenous inhabitants along racial lines.[44] In the words of Charmaine Nelson:

> The fact that, for centuries, various European nations endorsed a practice through which they settled and controlled distant lands upon which other people already lived, could only be justified and authorized by a racial and cultural logic of superiority of the European invaders and conquerors; a sense of the violence, oppression, and marginalization as necessity, as the God-given right of whites.[45]

In her work, Nelson analyzes the "racialization of land," which she defines as the process "whereby a geographical location comes to be identified by and through specific populations, natural and human-made sites and landmarks, forms of social, cultural, and commercial interaction and exchange."[46] In her study of colonial depictions of Jamaica, Nelson points to the centrality of the white, plantation owner's

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[43] Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and Amanda R. Tachine, "Myths, Erasure, and Violence: The Immoral Triad of the Morrill Act," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 143.
[44] A very partial list would include: Anne McClintock, "The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism," in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21–74; Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (2013): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2378892; Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*.
[45] Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*, 50.
[46] Nelson, 8.

perspective and the "racial objectification, which underpinned the tropical picturesque."[47] She argues that the way of seeing which allows the land to become an alienable object also produces the enslaved Black laborers as objects. This is a specific art historical example of the broader situation that Aimé Césaire sketched out when he wrote "colonization = 'thingification,'" meaning that the process of colonizing a territory reduced the living entities of that area, both human and nonhuman, to objects "drained of their essence."[48] Along related lines, Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that in the world view that defined human difference through the primary lenses of race and gender, "separability is the privileged ontological principle."[49] Ferreira da Silva instead emphasizes entanglement, incorporating a term that is widely used within environmental humanities and eco-criticism to refer to the complex interrelationships of species within an eco-system and thus also a way to emphasize an ontology of interconnectedness rather than difference.[50]

The conceptualization of landscapes in this dissertation offers an ontological as well as visual proposition, in which the human is reinserted into the picture and into relationship with the environment. The politics of this move, following Ferriera da Silva and Césaire, is to interrupt the reduction of land, humans, and other living

[47] Nelson, 210.
[48] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42, 43.
[49] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," in *Catalogue of the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo - Live Uncertainty (2016)*, 64, accessed September 17, 2019, https://issuu.com/bienal/docs/32bsp-catalogo-web-en.
[50] Another example of the conceptual utility of entanglement is Achille Mbembe's widely cited *On the Postcolony*, where he theorizes the temporal entanglement of postcolonial nations. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 14.

beings to objects or "things" and instead to present and experience the world as relational—as vividly alive and in flux. In resisting the distinction between nature and culture, and asserting the sociopolitical aspects of artists representing land, my approach is in alignment with what T.J. Demos, thinking with Kimberlé Crenshaw, Christina Sharpe, Alicia Garza, and others, has termed "ecology-as-intersectionality."[51] This method insists "on structural critiques that link intrahuman racial/sexual/ethnic/discriminatory violence with wider environmental destruction."[52]

Just as landscapes have been racialized, they have also been gendered and produced alongside categories of sexual difference. Anne McClintock put it succinctly in discussing European colonial perspectives: "The myth of the virgin land is also the myth of the empty land, involving both a gender and racial dispossession."[53] Of the four female-identified artists in this dissertation, Bopape most explicitly addresses a gendered relationship to soil, but the concerns of embodied sexual difference also play a critical role in the work of Montserrat and Nkanga. Further, the ethics and aesthetics of care, which I argue all these practices invoke, is a gendered value within a EuroAmerican framework. Looking to shift this, in *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, Angela Garbes expands the

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[51] Demos, *Beyond the World's End*, 11–14; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989), https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza – The Feminist Wire," *The Feminist Wire*, October 4, 2014, https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/.
[52] Demos, *Beyond the World's End*, 14.
[53] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30.

definition of mothering to "an action that includes people of all genders and nonparents alike" and a mode of creating a more just world through tending to the young.[54] In addition to being gendered, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung cautions that "care is too often appropriated and commodified, especially in contexts in which a power declivity is obvious."[55] He asks readers to strive for "a care that is not just a figure of speech, not just a metaphor nor analogy, but an undertaking."[56] Thinking about care with Garbes and Ndikung, I contend that the artists in this study are not reifying gender norms associated with caretaking. Rather, I read them as holding care as a value and method with which to attempt to build relationality across difference and to usher in new political and ontological possibilities.[57]

In her contribution to *The Routledge Companion*, Nomusa Makhubu discusses the work of several contemporary African artists engaging with environmental racism experienced by people living in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. She states that "the racialization of nature becomes the racialization of eco-justice and its related forms of activism."[58] Makhubu concludes that "contemporary African art

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[54] Angela Garbes, *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, e-book (New York: Harper Wave, 2022), 22.
[55] Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *The Delusions of Care* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2021), 56.
[56] Ndikung, 59.
[57] In making this distinction I am making a similar argument to Delinda Collier's reading of the short film *Pumzi* by the Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu. Collier argues that the narrative, in which the female protagonist in a post-apocalyptic future, sacrifices herself to grow a fig tree, is not re-enacting a gendered archetype but should instead be read as "practicing a kinship that crosses species boundaries." Collier instead ties *Pumzi* to the feminism of the Nobel Prize winning politician, scientist, and activist Wangari Maathai. See Delinda Collier, *Media Primitivism: Technological Art in Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 189.
[58] Nomusa Makhubu, "Capturing Nature: Eco-Justice in African Art," in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, ed. T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee (New York: Routledge, 2021), 284, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429321108.

illuminates the changing modes of relating nature and justice. It poses pressing questions about the feeling of injustice and the production of difference."[59] Makhubu's words highlight the importance of including African artists in conversations about the historical construction of nature and future visions for environmental justice. Similarly, Virginia MacKenny and Lesley Green write: "The call within much environmentally engaged art from Africa is to pay attention to the harm done by the dependence of global commodities markets on the destruction of African ecologies."[60] Despite the work of these scholars and the fact that the unfolding violence of climate destruction follows the contours of the existing inequalities produced by racial capitalism, the practices of Black and African artists still need to be given more space and attention in discussions of contemporary artistic landscapes, especially when thinking through the relationships between anti-Blackness, land, and climate crisis.[61] This dissertation is an important step toward expanding the scope of conversations on art, land, and climate justice, purposefully bringing into conversation pieces by artists working in and looking at sites across Africa, Europe, and North America.

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[59] Makhubu, 292.

[60] Virginia MacKenny and Lesley Green, "Extracting the Cost: Re-Membering the Discarded African Landscapes," in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, ed. T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee (New York: Routledge, 2021), 22, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429321108.

[61] In addition, just as land has often been gendered in addition to being racialized, the climate scientists Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katherine K. Wilkinson note that, "the climate crisis is not gender neutral" and offer several examples of how the risks of extreme weather events and burdens of climate adaptation will be disproportionately felt by women, girls, and nonbinary people, particularly in the Global South. See Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson, "Begin," in *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* (New York: One World, 2021), xviii.

Earthworks

In addition to broadening the contemporary dialogue, the works in this study invite a reconsideration of the genealogy of "earthworks" or "land art."[62] The US land art movement of the 1960s–1980s expanded the field and definition of art beyond the boundaries of the object and the gallery. Artists such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer, Agnes Denes and Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison made works directly in and/or with the environment. Amongst artists working in land art, there were a myriad of approaches and opinions, but in general their pieces re-oriented "the spacialization of art," opening it to new conversations about locality and place, and bringing it to new audiences.[63]

This generation of land art has been criticized for exemplifying an ideology of human dominance over the environment. Possibly two of the most well-known pieces are Robert Smithson's *Spiral Getty* (1970), a fifteen-hundred-foot-long spiral path made from six thousand tons of black basalt rock that reach out into Utah's Great Salt Lake, and Michael Heizer's fifty-foot-deep cut into Mormon Mesa, Nevada, *Double Negative* (1969).[64] The contemporaneous British artist Richard Long was actively critical of such artists as Smithson and Heizer, whom he dismissed as making

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[62] These terms are not entirely interchangeable, though there is considerable overlap between how they are used in art historical texts. Environmental art is also sometimes used for work that is outside. I am using land art for modern and contemporary artworks made within the discourses of the international artworld, while I consider earthworks a more expansive term less tied to a particular time and place and not necessarily intended as "art."

[63] Anne M. Wagner, "Being There: Art and the Politics of Place," *Artforum International* 43, no. 10 (2005): 268; Kay Larson, "The Expulsion from the Garden: Environmental Sculpture at the Winter Olympics," *Artforum*, April 1980, https://www.artforum.com/print/198004/the-expulsion-from-the-garden-environmental-sculpture-at-the-winter-olympics-35817.

[64] Dia, "Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty," accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/robert-smithson-spiral-jetty.

"capitalist art" because of the costs involved and the possessive attitude towards the land.[65] Long's own work often took the form of walks and the documentation of these walks, such as the photograph *A Line Made by Walking* (1969) or the print of arrows recording wind direction titled *Wind Line, A Straight Ten Mile Northward Walk on Dartmoor* (1985). These pieces explore how to represent being with and on the land in a way that is a forerunner of the works I analyze in this dissertation. Even some monumental works of environmental art could be read as critical of conceptualizing land as property. For example, Jeanne-Claude and Christo's *Running Fence* (1979) consisted of an eighteen-foot-high fence stretching across Sonoma and Marin counties in California and ending in the Pacific Ocean. As Andrews points out, the piece "unified segregated properties, dissolved county boundaries, and married sea and land," challenging the validity of imposed lines of possession and division.[66]

Though several practitioners of land art did engage with the social contexts of their art (Nancy Holt, for example) or issues of environmental destruction (the Harrisons), this was not the case for the majority of the artists most closely associated with land art.[67] More important, it was rare for these artists to consider the politics of their own positions and the structures of settler colonialism in which they were enmeshed. One notable exception to the latter was Ana Mendieta a Cuban American whose art practice is another precursor to those discussed in this dissertation.

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[65] Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 215.
[66] Andrews, 158.
[67] Wagner, "Being There," 267; Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison, and Joshua Harrison, "Overview," Center for the Study of the Force Majeure, accessed August 10, 2022, http://www.centerforforcemajeure.org.

Genevieve Hyacinthe compellingly argues that "Mendieta through her own black Atlantic strategies of radical virtuosity confronted the hegemony of the U.S. Earthworks movement."[68] Mendieta's *Silueta* series is discussed in chapter 3, in relation to Montserrat's submerging of her own body in the land.

In her 2013 exhibition and accompanying catalog *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*, Karen Milbourne extends an even broader critique of the dominant land art narrative. She writes: "Earthworks did not begin on the deserts of Nevada or the verdant countryside of Southern England; there are complex and longstanding international histories that inform contemporary practices."[69] Milbourne offers Igbo *mbari*, houses adorned with collectively made colorful clay sculptures that "would slowly dissolve back into the earth to fertilize a new generation for growth," as a vital earthwork, along with different practices of earthen shrines from across the continent.[70] She goes on to survey the work of the African artists Strijdom van der Merwe, Ghada Amer, El Anatsui, Willem Boshoff, and Rachid Koraïchi, all active since the 1990s, arguing that "earth *works* for each of these artists—as both medium and message."[71]

Indigenous artists in the settler colonial states of the US and Canada have also been left out of canonical land art narratives but for decades have been thinking about

[68] Genevieve Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 181.
[69] Karen Milbourne, *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa* (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2013), 241.
[70] Milbourne, 244.
[71] Milbourne, 243.

land, ecology, and sovereignty via artworks both inside and outside the gallery. The 1990 exhibition *Our Land/Ourselves* curated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation) brought together thirty Native American artists who depicted the land. In the catalog introduction Smith writes:

> The artists in this exhibit take multiple approaches to describing land/landscape. . . . whether celebrating human interaction with the land or cautioning the destruction of the land they weave their distinct conceptions in and through an interior view.[72]

This interior view that Smith articulates stands in contrast to the trajectory of separation seen in the European tradition as outlined by Cosgrove, Bermingham and others. Writing more recently, Kate Morris terms this an "anti-invitational stance" and argues that "[Indigenous] landscapes resonate with a fully embodied, one might even say *embedded*, subjectivity."[73] More recently, the Indigenous art collective Postcommodity removed a concrete square from the floor of the Arizona State Art Museum, revealing the earth below in the work *Do You Remember When* (2009). This perforation of the gallery references the forms of 1960s minimalism to "question the authority of the museum and to acknowledge the aboriginal lands beneath [the viewers'] feet."[74] Works outside the gallery include pieces such as the Mohawk artist Alan Michaelson's *Earth's Eye* (1990), in which he laid a group of cast concrete markers in a circle on a Manhattan street, outlining the memory of an extinct freshwater pond, and the Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's giant wooden

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[72] Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, "Curator's Statement," in *Our Land/Ourselves: American Indian Contemporary Artists* (Albany, N.Y: University Art Gallery, University at Albany, State University of New York, 1990), vi.
[73] Morris, *Shifting Grounds*, 4–5.
[74] Morris, 81.

megaphone *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), through which First Nation communities were invited to address the land. In *Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene*, Jessica Horton writes:

> First Nations have long practiced diplomacy in the name of ecology, encoded and communicated through wordless arts. Imaginative reprisals of this intersection in contemporary art have consistently answered to universalizing accounts of planetary dysfunction with calls for justice that bind disparate human and other-than-human persons."[75]

In support of this, Horton analyzes several artworks from the 1980s and 1990s, including installations by Jimmie Durham and performances by Belmore. Horton points out that long before the current conversations in posthumanism, "Durham and Belmore creatively modeled kinship and dialogue among diverse human and other-than-human beings in the context of shared justice struggles."[76]

The artists in this study are each informed by a variety of international practices and histories. For example, like Smithson, Nkanga is interested in how to represent the relationship between the location of her research and the location of display—Smithson conceptualized these as the site (outside the gallery) and the non-site (the sculpture within the gallery)—and Nkanga considers the industrial sites of mining in Namibia as monuments, a possible reference to Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967). But unlike Smithson or Heizer, Nkanga considers the experience of the rocks being moved. She also often includes photographs or drawings of anthills in her Tsumeb installations, referring to them as "acts of ant architecture" and thus

[75] Jessica L. Horton, "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 55, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2017.1367192.
[76] Horton, 59.

acknowledging the earth-moving creativity of nonhuman beings.[77] Rather than Richard Long, Montserrat cites Shiraga Kazuo's performance *Challenging Mud* (1955) as an inspiration for her direct interactions with the earth. She says:

> Gutai pioneered that approach to bringing art into the outdoors. This performance had so much to say about the actual materials, about how we connect with our earth and soil, in the context of stewarding in a future where we are not separated from our environments. [78]

And when asked in an interview about the influence of Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977–ongoing), and other land art pieces on her practice, Bopape distanced herself from that tradition: "Initially I wasn't thinking directly about land art per se. It was more the material; I was interested in the nothing, the dust and also ideas of fertility, sovereignty relating to the land, memory, [and] soil as a repository."[79] Aaron Katzeman, comparing De Maria's piece to *A Small Area of Land (Kaka'ako Earth Room)* (2013) by the artist Sean Connelly, notes that the earth in De Maria's piece is regularly raked and watered and that "the desire for an unfluctuating viewing experience acts to destabilize the very liveliness of the material."[80] He goes on to argue that this reflects:

> the American ideal of "untouched" wilderness that fails to consider how such presumed landscapes on the North American continent have always been culturally produced, maintained and altered by indigenous peoples, with the "natural" being an arbitrarily chosen stage that then has to be repeatedly reimplemented by forceful exclusion of human and nonhuman inhabitants alike.[81]

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[77] Clare Molloy, Otobong Nkanga, and Fabian Schöneich, "Intimate Connections," in *Otobong Nkanga: Luster and Lucre* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 179.
[78] Emily Steer, "Jade Montserrat: The Gutai Collective Taught Me How to Connect to My Materials," Elephant, July 15, 2022, https://elephant.art/jade-montserrat-the-gutai-collective-taught-me-how-to-be-intimately-connected-to-my-materials-15072022/.
[79] Dineo Seshee Bopape, http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/news/artist-to-watch/dineo-seshee-bopape/.
[80] Aaron Katzeman, "Making Room for Earth in Hawai'i: Sean Connelly's A Small Area of Land," *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 20, no. 1 (2021): 48.
[81] Katzeman, 48.

In contrast, Bopape's installations (similar to Connelly's sculpture) may weep soil, show the growth of new shoots of earth, or in the case of *Lerato le le golo (. . . la go hloka bo kantle*) (2022) erode and crumble back into the desert. The borders of the works are not easily defined; instead, they are a site of fluctuation, a record of the artist's presence and exchange with the environment.

Methodology

The artists I study all use the materiality of the ground to interrogate and bring into consciousness intersections between racist ideologies and abuse of the nonhuman environment. In addition to thinking within the frames of the racial Capitalocene and visual histories of landscapes and earthworks, my close reading of the artworks is informed by visual analysis, research into the social and personal history of the materials and lands they engage, and the words of the artists themselves. Where possible, I have conducted interviews with the artists as well as performers or participants as appropriate. In three of the four chapters I was also an active participant to some degree.

My participatory methods reflect my commitment to write alongside artworks, teasing out the political, aesthetic, and affective conversations that they make possible. I agree with Erin Manning that "making is a thinking in its own right" and I understand artworks as both objects of study and catalysts of thought.[82] In addition, given that one of my research questions was about the communicative powers of materials and touch, I considered it important to become intimate with the materials

[82] Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 28, https://read-dukeupress-edu.oca.ucsc.edu/books/book/71/The-Minor-Gesture.

myself where possible. To this end, in February 2020, I made the seven-hour drive to Joshua Tree to make adobe bricks for Bopape's *Lerato le le golo (. . . la go hloka bo kantle*) (2022). Over two days alongside several other volunteers, I made about 80 of the 5,832 bricks required.

Later in 2020, I created a digital project with Montserrat and her frequent collaborators Webb-Ellis in which we discussed the difficult content of their film *Cage* (2014). The resulting piece is currently available online and serves as a set of digital liner notes to *Cage*.[83] I also worked with Montserrat, the Scottish arts venue Hospitalfield, and the Santa Cruz artists Melody Overstreet and Vince Waring to organize an online drawing workshop for students from UC Santa Cruz. Overstreet and Waring created charcoal from locally gathered wood and collected charcoal from the areas of nearby forest burned in the 2020 California wildfires. As discussed in chapter 3, the origin and material qualities of charcoal are important to Montserrat's practice and Overstreet and Waring created a similarly site-specific material for workshop participants in Santa Cruz.

For Solitary Garden, I was not only a participant but a paid curator of the project. In my position as a graduate student fellow with the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, I facilitated the installation of the UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden as well as the inclusion of sumell's Herman's House and Timothy Young's letters in *Barring Freedom* at the San Jose Museum of Art. Working with sumell and Young for several

[83] Jade Montserrat et al., *Cage*, 2020, digital art project, 2020, https://www.platformartprojects.com/jade-montserrat-webb-ellis-alexandra-moore-cage.

years has provided me with a deep understanding of the project and its political engagements. In chapter 4, I discuss the power dynamics of my role and of projects that claim to facilitate collaboration across prison walls as well as the potential contradictions of having an explicitly abolitionist work within a university campus. With both chapters 3 and 4, my writing is inextricable from the friendships I have formed through the research, and I do not claim objective distance.

The sites where I have participated in the creation of work for this research are also places in which the artwork has implicated me through places I know and am connected to—Yorkshire, California, UC Santa Cruz. My commitment to antiracist, anticolonial, and environmental justice frameworks is part of an ongoing process of questioning the societies and spaces within which I have lived. I grew up within the imperial amnesia of Britain and recognize the undercurrent of racism lurking within the pastoral fantasy that Montserrat troubles. Later, I studied and worked in Cameroon and quickly came to see that the geopolitical understanding I had absorbed of the world was deeply flawed. As a white British and American woman, I understand the histories of colonialism and enslavement to have created my position in the world and to have informed what it means to be white, a woman, and British or American. Now, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the structures of racial capitalism and settler colonialism are the ones within which I reside and work. I am interested in forms of creative visual production and aesthetic innovation that bring attention to the stories that remain unheard in the spaces and institutions which I

occupy. By writing alongside such artworks, I hope that my individual perspective can be further transformed and challenged.

Chapter Overviews

The artists in this dissertation intervene in the relationship between representation and possession sketched out above. Instead of producing objectification and possession, the landscapes I analyze function as an interface between human and land, probing the relationships between racist and anthropocentric forms of domination and exploitation and drawing attention to the fundamental interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life.

In the first chapter I examine the work that Otobong Nkanga made in response to her research at the Tsumeb mine in Namibia. I situate Nkanga's Tsumeb artworks within the history of German colonialism in Namibia and within the framework of racial capitalism. I contend that Nkanga critiques visual forms of imaging landscape, such as topographic maps, that render the earth easily legible for consumption. I argue that Nkanga offers a historically situated critique of racial capitalism, investigating the roles of visual pleasure and desire within this sociopolitical formation and, further, that she explores modes of being and attention, particularly touch and song, that help her move beyond this value system.

In chapter 2, I unpack Dineo Seshee Bopape's use of clay and soil in relationship to the South African Land Rights and Pan Africanist movements. Focusing on Bopape's large installations that transport earth from different sites into

the gallery space to create new landscapes, I argue that the soil functions in her work as a form of archive that communicates erased histories of Black Liberation and the suppressed spiritual traditions of honoring the land. Emphasizing the respect and agency due to the earth, the works tie the future of Black citizenship in South Africa to a global reckoning with capitalism and anti-Blackness. The materiality of the ground is important across all the chapters, but soil is central in this chapter, as it connects the political symbolism and discourses of Robert Sobukwe to the material consequences of colonial displacement and the ongoing struggle for land rights and provides a way to think about the entanglements of living and nonliving. In making space for new growth in her installations as well as burying uterine forms, Bopape also points to soil as portal to the future—a place for the cultivation of new life.

In the third chapter, I explore the films, installations, and performances of Jade Montserrat within the context of the politics of land ownership in Britain and Britain's role in the Atlantic slave trade. I draw on the specific discourses of landscape and nature within Britain and look at how race, place, and Englishness have been defined in relationship to one another. I trace Montserrat's investigation of materials found in her environment, whether clay, peat, or charcoal, to her explorations of self-creation, connectedness, and race. I argue that Montserrat establishes her own framework for belonging through building curious, collaborative, and creative relationships with human and nonhuman parts of the ecosystem. I end by pointing to Montserrat's workshops with soil and plants as a mode of welcoming

asylum seekers, building connections and new definitions of belonging through the earth.

The final chapter turns to the garden and plant-based practice of jackie sumell to look at the relationship between land, race, and incarceration in the United States. I focus on sumell's collaboration at the University of California, Santa Cruz with Timothy Young, who is currently being held in solitary confinement at the San Quentin State Penitentiary. Young's situation is one of extreme isolation from both other humans and from other living forms, as he is held alone in a cell for at least twenty-two hours a day. The *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* points to the cruelty of this practice while attempting to provide a way for Young to "see" and be in relation with the land and plants beyond the walls of the prison, via the letters and photos of others. Drawing from Sylvia Wynter's theorization of the plot within the plantation system, I contend sumell and Young's *Solitary Garden* develops a space of interconnectivity for fostering a relational vision of humanness within the carceral landscape of the United States. This vision of humanness looks towards an abolitionist as well as ecologically sound future.

1. Otobong Nkanga's Embodied Tsumeb

At the entrance to her 2019 exhibition at Tate St. Ives, Otobong Nkanga displayed a collection of research photographs of Tsumeb, Namibia. Some were black and white images from archival sources showing industrial machinery and mine workers in action against a backdrop of sparse brush or in dark underground caverns. Others were color prints taken by the artist herself depicting the same site in 2014, the buildings and machinery rusted and still, the landscape grey and muted with no people in sight.

In this chapter, I examine the installations, paintings, performances, and videos that Nigerian-born, Antwerp-based artist Otobong Nkanga has made in response to her research in Namibia at the Tsumeb mine. I situate Nkanga's Tsumeb artworks within the history of German colonialism in Namibia, examining the materials and mediums that Nkanga employs to consider how she engages with modes of abstracting and prospecting land, the forces of desire and visual pleasure, and the social and ecological consequences of these combined impulses. I argue that her work attempts to make sensible the workings of globalized racial capitalism at Tsumeb while trying to find ways to interact with and represent the mine site and materials in ways that step outside this value system. To make this broader argument, I contend that she critiques visual forms that render the earth easily legible for consumption and explores ways in which the experiences of humans and land are intertwined.

This chapter contributes to the overall argument of the dissertation by examining the relationship between materials, landscapes, and racial capitalism in colonial and

postcolonial mining practices and as addressed in contemporary art. In exploring this intersection of sites and systems of power, I draw upon François Vergès' conception of the "racial Capitolocene," further developing the ideas in the introduction, and analyze Nkanga's work as a critique of discourses of the "Anthropocene" that obscure the colonial roots of environmental destruction. [84]

In recent decades, scholars and artists thinking through the political economy of artistic materials have brought attention to the role of materials in colonial visuality and extractivism and explored the potential for materials to communicate anticolonial politics. For example, in art history, Natasha Eaton's work on the politics of color in Indian nationalism teases out the complex relationships between the ways dyes and colors are understood and used within the context of colonial trade and popular resistance, and Jordanna Bailkin's research on Indian Yellow analyzes the relationship between depictions of the colony and governing of the colony.[85] Several contemporary artists are focused on the examination of materials to trace the labor and trade typically invisible in the commodity, and to invite conversations about ecology, labor, the environment, and colonial relations. For example, Steve McQueen's following of the mineral ore coltan down the Congo River and the Thames in *Gravesend* (2007); Jeremy Hutchinson's explorations of the indigo plant

[84] Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene."
[85] Natasha Eaton, "Chromophobic Activism: The Politics and Materiality of Art and Colour in India, circa 1917–circa 1966," *Third Text* 28, no. 6 (2014): 475–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2014.970769; Jordanna Bailkin, "Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette," in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, ed. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 90–110.

in *Fabrications* (2013); or Sammy Baloji's work with copper in *Memoire* (2015) each explore legacies of colonialism through a deep exploration of an extracted material across time and space. Scholars such as T.J. Demos and Rachel Nelson have analyzed the role of McQueen and Baloji's works respectively in critiques of globalization.[86] Most recently, Anna Arabindon-Kesson's monograph on the materiality and history of cotton, investigates cotton as a "material with memory" and "infused with sentiment, both personal and cultural" by looking at images and objects from the nineteenth century as well as contemporary artworks by Lubaina Himid, Hank Willis Thomas, and others.[87] Nkanga's work is part of these larger dialogues about material connections and memories within international networks of capital and trade that stretch from the colonialism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the present.

Nkanga has been showing extensively since the mid 2000s and her practice has been the focus of several catalogs, short articles, and academic studies.[88] The existing scholarship on Nkanga's work has, amongst formal and biographic approaches, begun to look at Nkanga's relationship to history and her materials. In "Otobong Nkanga:

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[86] T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013); Rachel E. Nelson, "At the Edge of Ruin: Seeing Art Under Perpetual Conflict" (UC Santa Cruz, 2016), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5768k8tk.
[87] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 204, 205.
[88] Molloy, Nkanga, and Schöneich, "Intimate Connections"; Omar Kholeif and Teju Cole, *Otobong Nkanga: To Dig a Hole That Collapses Again* (Chicago, IL: Munich; New York: Prestel, 2018); Anne Barlow and Otobong Nkanga, "Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Anne Barlow," in *Otobong Nkanga: From Where I Stand* (Tate Publishing, 2019), 53–61; Tone Hansen and Karen Monica Reini, eds., *Otobong Nkanga: Uncertain Where the next Wind Blows* (Köln: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2021).

Nothing Is Like It Seems, Everything is Evidence" Yvette Mutumba focuses on Nkanga's exploration of the entanglement of cultures and her dialogic approach to history, suggesting that Nkanga's work repudiates not only desires for "authentic" African art, but the very idea of stable nations and identities. In this chapter I build from Mutumba's reading, delving more explicitly into the "dark side of colonial and capitalist exploitation" that Mutumba only alludes to.[89] In an article in the same edition of *Afterall* as Mutumba's, Monika Szewczyk's "Exchange and Some Change: The Imaginative Economies of Otobong Nkanga," investigates Nkanga's use of plants and minerals as the locus for an exchange of knowledges. Szewczyk suggests that Nkanga does not explicitly critique colonial institutions and tropes, but rather uses them for her own generative purposes of dialogue and building new relations with the world.[90] Szewczyk ends by suggesting that in Nkanga's exchanges "what we seem to be witnessing is a form of camaraderie."[91] An MA Thesis by Sanne Kanters focuses on one of Nkanga's works, *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015), as a critique of European humanism and anthropocentrism, engaging primarily with the writing of Rosie Braidotti.[92] Most recently, Kristin Pahl published an article in *Theory & Event* that explores the "matterphorical" relations that Nkanga draws between "plants,

[89] Yvette Mutumba, "Otobong Nkanga: Nothing Is Like It Seems, Everything Is Evidence," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, & Enquiry* 37, no. 1 (September 2014): 59.
[90] Monika Szewczyk, "Exchange and Some Change: The Imaginative Economies of Otobong Nkanga," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, & Enquiry* 37, no. 1 (2014): 49.
[91] Szewczyk, 50.
[92] Sanne Kanters, "Life in Ruins. Thinking through the Geological Reformation of the Human Subject with Otobong Nkanga's Remains of the Green Hill" (Masters in Gender Studies, Utrecht University, 2017).

minerals, and humans."[93] Pahl, along similar lines as Szewzyk and Kanters, argues that Nkanga's approach "enable[s] less hierarchical modes of co-existing."[94]

In making their arguments, Kanters and Pahl both approach Nkanga's work through the current analytic often referred to as new materialism or object-oriented ontology. I find much of their analysis and conclusions useful. However, these texts don't spend significant time with the colonial and neocolonial contexts of the places and materials Nkanga explores. Kanters acknowledges these limits of her approach. Pahl argues that Nkanga makes visible alliances that have been formed between rocks and humans that are the result of colonial "stress and pressure."[95] She subsequently mentions the Namibian genocide as relevant context for the Tsumeb works but only very briefly. Instead, she focuses her analysis on the forms of relationship that Nkanga forms with rocks and the types of nonhuman agency that she makes space for. In this chapter, I supplement the interesting and provocative perspectives provided by Kanters and Pahl.. I foreground the specific colonial histories which are embedded in the Tsumeb work's images and materials and in doing so, my analysis points more towards the ways of seeing that inform extractivism and the human consequences of mining at Tsumeb, even as I consider how these are deeply intertwined with the larger ecological web of human and nonhuman, living and non-living beings.

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[93] Katrin Pahl, "Improbable Intimacy: Otobong Nkanga's Grafts and Aggregates," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 240.
[94] Pahl, 240.
[95] Pahl, 240, 256.

Before 1884, the area currently called Namibia was inhabited by linguistically and ethnically diverse groups, interconnected through various trade routes and economic, social, and political pressures. At the 1884 Berlin Conference, this land was demarcated and claimed by Germany as South West Africa. After an initially limited form of intervention, colonial domination expanded aggressively, aiming to keep the Africans within limited reservations and leave the majority of the terrain available for German exploitation—primarily farming and mining. In 1904, when the Nama and Herero peoples began to resist these measures, the Germans implemented an aggressive genocide, killing thousands, causing many to flee through the desert to present day Botswana and South Africa, and imprisoning survivors in concentration camps.[96] The political and social structures of the survivors were devastated and the Germans enacted oppressive and racially defined ordinances, aiming to "transform the Africans into a landless proletariat."[97] During World War I, South Africa invaded South West Africa and was granted mandate over the territory by the League of Nations. Over the course of the next fifty years, the South African colonial government enforced the same forms of ethnic segregation, racial apartheid, and migrant labor that were implemented in South Africa. During German and then South African occupation, the Tsumeb mine in the Northern area of present-day Namibia fell within the "Police Zone," the area designated for white settlement, and was part

[96] Both Herero and Nama are ethnic labels used in modern Namibia, but which have emerged and evolved over the last hundred years. My use of the terms reflects their modern use in relationship to the genocide.
[97] Marion Wallace, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 184.

of the prosperous Otavi triangle.[98] From this mine, the German and South African colonial regimes aggressively extracted minerals including mica and malachite.

In the landscape that saw the first genocide of the twentieth century followed by decades of apartheid, Nkanga draws our attention to the bright green malachite and shimmering mica. Through her artworks, Nkanga invites viewers to look at the violence that infuses landscapes produced by the longue durée of colonialism in Namibia and which is connected to current politics and environmental crises. In this way, her work explores how the colonial violence against landscapes and humans are intertwined.

Cuts in the Land

Nkanga's Tsumeb installation are meditations on the framing, understanding, and consuming of land as minerals—land as a collection of extractable elements with valuable properties. Though hundreds of different minerals and crystals were mined at Tsumeb, many of Nkanga's pieces focus on two that are particularly ubiquitous in modern life: mica and malachite. Mica is a group of silicon-based minerals that form in sheets and are named for their shine. It has many uses including refrigerator insulation, concrete, and cosmetics. Malachite is a copper carbonate that is mined as crystals. It has had wide use throughout the history of art: for example, in Mayan funerary masks and eighteenth-century Russian mosaic work. It was also one of the earliest sources of copper ore, and thus the copper for rooves such as church spires or in electrical wiring.

[98] Wallace, 286.

Figure 1 Unknown Photographer, *The Green Hill in Tsumeb-567 km from the Start of the Otavi Railway* (c.1900). National archives of Namibia, Windhoek. Courtesy of Otobong Nkanga.

Nkanga gives some insight into the precolonial mines. One of the many images she unearthed and has used in her installations is a photograph from around 1900 of the Green Hill of Tsumeb, before industrial mining began in earnest (figure 1). The image shows the hill, which has a crystalline, almost coral-like surface. Though it is labeled as green, the image is in black and white, leaving a viewer to imagine the fulgent vibrancy of the landscape. Nkanga also photographed sites where local inhabitants had mined the copper ore before colonial industrial mining took place. Some of these show slender and curved openings into the rock face. Nkanga says: “The mines that were dug out by the local people were more curved and

rounded and it showed where they needed to just take the mineral and then leave the rest behind."[99] This description and the image from 1900 contrast strongly with photographs Nkanga took of the open pit in 2016 that emphasize the deep straight trenches that were created through industrial mining.

In the tapestry *In Pursuit of Bling: The Discovery* (2014) a large crystal, pierced with needles, hovers in front of a topographic map, all rendered in pale pinks and browns (figure 2). The map is also brown and pink, except for vibrant jolts of blue that read as bodies of water. The map is overlaid with a red rectangle, the bottom and left-hand sides of which are marked at even intervals, suggesting X and Y axes that offer measurements for scale and the potential foundation for a grid to designate segments of the map. The topography in the tapestry is stamped with the chemical abbreviations for various elements and compounds, as if marking where deposits can be found. This chemical notation inscribes the terrain into a system of knowledge that sees the land as a collection of minerals to be named, sorted, and extracted.

[99] Otobong Nkanga, In Conversation at MIMA, March 31, 2021.

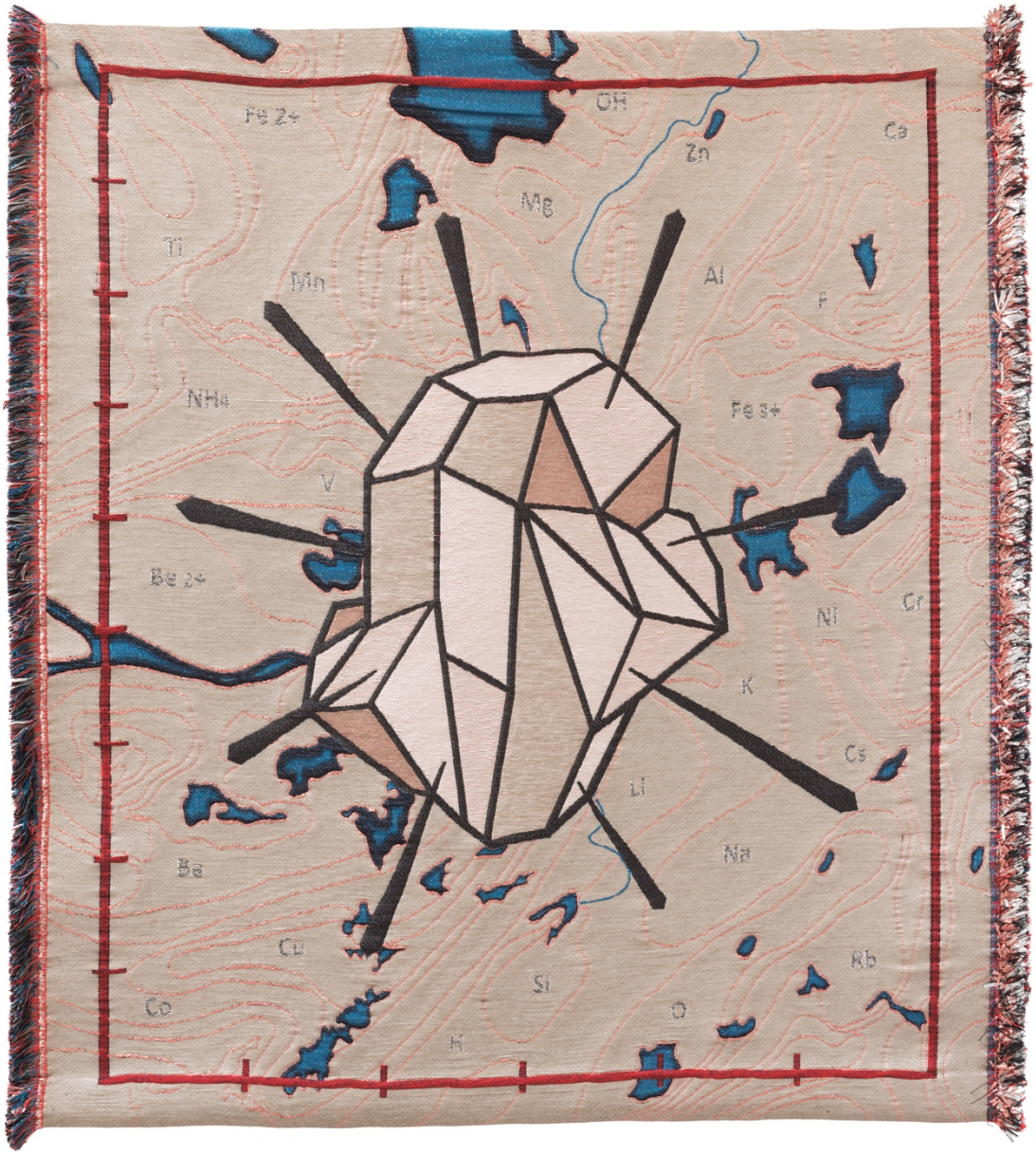

Figure 2 Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling: The Discovery*, 2014. Woven textile (viscose, wool, mohair, and organic cotton). 190 x 180cm. Photo: Joe Humphries. Courtesy of the artist.

This tapestry is sometimes displayed in an installation of Nkanga's (also titled *In Pursuit of Bling*), along with a mica tile printed with a quote from an account by European and American traders in 1875. The text recounts the traders' first encounter

with the green hill of Tsumeb and the already existing mine.[100] They assess the terrain numerically, in terms of value potential as calculated by mass of ore, distance needed to transport it (presumably to European and American markets), and viability of extraction. Together the image and quote demonstrate the enlightenment relationship with nature that Michel Serres articulates as mastery and possession, a parasitism that equates knowledge with domination. [101]

The transformation of the green hill of Tsumeb into a craterous pit was presaged by the forms of cataloging and labeling the minerals that Nkanga draws attention to in the tapestry and tile. In the analysis of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, language functions through a process of differentiating and dividing—through marking difference.[102] Our conceptual maps, our modes of thought, rely upon our ability to distinguish a hill from a hole, one mineral from another. In a discussion of artist Jimmie Durham's use of language in his practice, Jennifer González remarks:

> Just as our physical infrastructure is a literal carving up and redistribution of our material world, so language is a carving up of thought across the continuous manifold that is reality. Language

[100] The full text reads: "The next morning we began a search for the mine, but were unsuccessful for nearly half the day; and when we finally did find it, it was not more than 200 yards from the wagon. Such is the nature of that part of the country, a dense jungle; and not withstanding the frequent visits of the natives no footpaths led to the mine. The mine seemed to be of great richness and pits were dug along the line of the lode for a considerable distance. There were masses of ore of many tons in weight exposed in many places, and seemed to have been left for want of proper tools to breaking it up into a portable form. We had a large hammer, and I broke off about 300lbs of it for a sample. It was very hot work, the thermometer being 106F in the shade, and we were excessively annoyed by a species of gnat which is common in parts of the country. The mine would be very valuable if near the sea, but is too far to transport it by wagon, I do not think a railway feasible. In fact, between the mine and Walwich Bay there is not water enough to feed one engine a day. The distance is about 350 miles."

[101] Michel Serres, "The Natural Contract," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1992): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1086/448661.

[102] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 31.

> is the fluid, mercurial, and barbed-wire limit of that reality, the silver-tongued knife slice, the finely measured frame of meaning.[103]

González describes language as the knife which cuts through the uninterrupted wholeness (the chaos) of existence, portioning it into meaning-conveying fragments. She goes on to note that though all language slices through reality, some language does damage. My interest here is the material consequences of the particular languages used to represent the ground at Tsumeb and how Nkanga's work draws attention to their damage.

In addition to the archival images of Tsumeb, Nkanga also includes in her exhibitions and installations her own photographs of the mine, taken during a research trip in 2016. Rather than a crystalline, almost coral-like hill, Nkanga's images show a deep pit, where the edges of the rock are gauged straight. To think of the green fulgent hill not as a place but a resource led to this material change. To name the rocks and dirt as "ore," as the visiting traders did in 1857, inscribes the land within a logic of profit; to name it as separate minerals, as on the tapestry, breaks it into functional fragments.[104] In both cases, the language prefigures the cuts which took this terrain apart.

The representation of terrain in *The Discovery* shows no traces of human life within the map. A human is only implied as the maker and viewer of the map, standing at a careful remove from the land itself—what Denis Cosgrove refers to as

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[103] Jennifer A González, "Categorical Refusal: Unwinding the Wound," in *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* (Los Angeles: Munich; New York: Prestel, 2017), 192.
[104] In the OED ore is defined as: "a naturally occurring solid material from which a metal or valuable mineral can be extracted profitably."

the "sovereign eye."[105] Several scholars have argued that the forms of map-making that European colonists brought to Southern Africa imposed European conceptions of space, land, and property.[106] The maps created at this time either erased the presence of indigenous inhabitants completely or inaccurately represented their land claims, perspective and histories. In the words of Patricia Hayes, European explorers "sought to erase autochthonous readings of landscape through an ominous discourse of blankness, propped up by empirical techniques."[107] The map in *The Discovery* reflects these perspectives.

Before German conquest, Hai||Om speakers lived close to the hill and traded the copper ore with Ovambo groups, who used the copper for jewelry and weapons.[108] How did the people who lived alongside the green hill conceptualize this mound of minerals? According to J.U. Kavari and Laura Bleckmann, the *omit̲and̲u* praise poems of the Otjiherero-speaking communities living north-west of Tsumeb link the memory of people and events to features in the landscape. In these praise poems, graves, springs, trees, and mountains function as memory-places, tethering "the

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[105] Denis Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World*, vol. 12, International Library of Human Geography (London: IB Tauris, 2008), 48.
[106] Pascal Glatigny, Estelle Maré, and Russel Viljoen, "Inter Se Nulli Fines: Representations of the Presence of the Khoikhoi in Early Colonial Maps of the Cape of Good Hope," *South African Journal of Art History* 23, no. II (2008): 301–18; Lesley Green, "Cape Town's Natures: ||Hu-! Gais, Heerengracht, HoerikwaggoTM," in *Rock | Water | Life*, Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa (Duke University Press, 2020), 25–59, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv116893x.6; Patricia Hayes, "A Land of Goshen," in *African Landscapes: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Olaf Bubenzer and Michael Bollig, Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 225–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-78682-7_8.
[107] Hayes, "A Land of Goshen," 225.
[108] Francis Galton, "Recent Expedition into the Interior of South-Western Africa," *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 22 (1852): 140–63, https://doi.org/10.2307/1798208; Wallace, *A History of Namibia*.

belonging of a group to the land of their ancestors."[109] Similarly, Patricia Hayes argues that in the oral historiography of the Kwanyama and other Ovambo groups who live north of Tsumeb, the landscape functions as a social hieroglyph, or a "bank of signs" which can be drawn upon and layered onto.[110] The stories of kingship genealogies and power shifts are stories *in* the landscape.[111] As Hayes points out, the oral histories are in direct opposition to the discourse of blankness imposed upon the terrain by European merchants, politicians, and cartographers before carving it up. Men from these different communities likely worked at Tsumeb, as the miners were primarily migrant laborers from the northern reservations.[112]

[109] J.U. Kavari and Laura E. Bleckmann, "Otjiherero Praises of Places," in *African Landscapes: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Olaf Bubenzer and Michael Bollig, Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 496, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-78682-7_18.
[110] Hayes, "A Land of Goshen," 232.
[111] Hayes, 251.
[112] Wallace, *A History of Namibia*, 221, 230.

Figure 3 Otobong Nkanga, *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*, 2015. KADIST Art Foundation, Paris. Photo by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.

In the wall drawing *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine* (2015) Nkanga ties the measurement and abstraction of land to histories of human labor, giving brief glimpses into the experience of the miners at Tsumeb (figure 3). Created at Kadist in Paris, the mural stretched the full length of the gallery space. The work illustrates three distinct processes (prospecting, mapping, and mining) and visually connects these processes respectively to the themes of desire, abstraction (or translation) of the earth, and the human consequences of these forces. Moving right to left, as a visitor to the gallery would have experienced it, the painting starts with a collection of large green and blue mounds—the malachite and azurite. Here we have an imagining of the

green hill before it was cut apart. It is large and undulating, with delicate lines upon the surface to suggest the crystalline structure. Individual pieces of this whole have been pierced through with spikes, one of which originates from a doll or machine-like arm. These spike-like forms are motifs that repeat throughout Nkanga's practice. I interpret them as borrowing a visual language from physics, in which an arrow is often used to represent a force as a vector. Here the arrows are transformed into needles which visualize the force of desire that attracts people to the rocks as glittering commodities, resulting in the destructive fragmentation of the green hill. Nkanga said of the work: "I was thinking about desire and how desire changes from a personal desire into a machinery that becomes an industry."[113]

The second section abstractly depicts the transformation from individual desire into large scale industrial processes. Nkanga overlays a series of grey and purple vertical bars onto a bird's eye view of land, in which undulating green lines suggest bodies of water. The bars are taken from a technical drawing of mine shafts and their different depths within the earth, and the grey lines suggest a regulation of the land, rendering it legible through measurement and segmentation. These multiple forms of abstracting and prospecting space separate and define an area of land, defining it in geologic terms of mineral composition and location and removing it from the surrounding ecosystem. These types of images function to process and refine the land in preparation for use. In Nkanga's wall drawing they perform a similar function, as

[113] *Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Claire Molloy*, 2015, https://kadist.org/program/otobong-nkanga-video/.

the transition between the desire for the rocks on one side, and the running of a mine on the other.

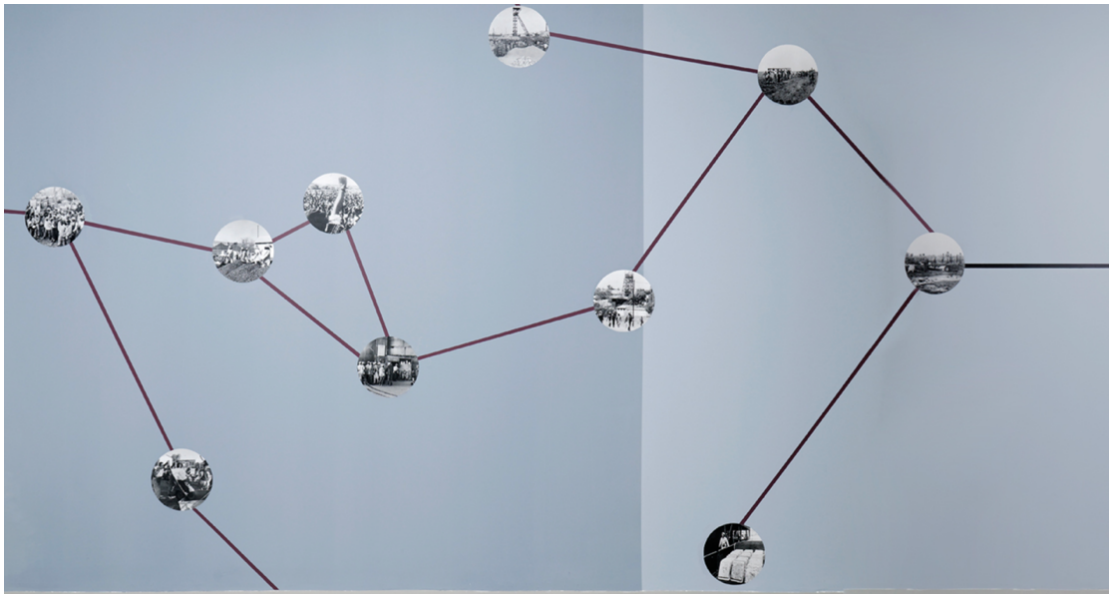

Figure 4 Otobong Nkanga, *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*, 2015. KADIST Art Foundation, Paris. Detail. Photo by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.

The third section of the drawing is a network of round photographs adhered to the wall, connected with painted lines (figure 4). The design formed here, in addition to suggesting an astronomical constellation, also borrows from the visual language of chemistry models, an iconographic choice that also reoccurs in Nkanga's oeuvre. Within this design, each of the ten circles encloses a different black and white photograph from the Tsumeb archives. The aesthetic reference to scientific illustrations points to the ways that a technical perspective can shape ways of seeing. Leslie Green defines scientism as "an unreasonable faith in the claim that science is independent and neutral." She goes on to write that "distinguishing between science and scientism…[allows] for thinking critically about the irrational, transcendent

political power that science accrues when it denies its locatedness in society."[114] By using the visual language of chemical compound models in concert with archival images of miners, Nkanga brings into view the social and ethical perspectives that can slip out of scientific models.

The photographs embedded within *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine* span from 1903 to 1980 and encapsulate a brief history of colonialism in what is now Namibia and begin to open up towards the human stories entwined with the terrain. They push the viewer to the see the full sweep of the territorial impulse. Two of the photographs show African workers laying steel tracks across open stretches of brush. In 1903 Anglo-German owned South West Africa Company, who had the rights to the mining at Tsumeb started to build a railway from Otavi to the coast at Swakopmund. Nkanga refers to this as the Germans going "against the grain of the landscape", as they fought the weather, the realities of the climate, and the terrain itself.[115] It was also a fight against the inhabitants: The loss of key grazing land and demand for labor escalated tensions between the German settlers and the increasingly disenfranchised Africans, provoking armed resistance by the Herero and leading to the Namibian War. The survivors were imprisoned in concentration camps and forced to work building the infrastructure of the colony. In April 1906, 900 men, 700 women and 620 children built the railroad, which transported ore to global markets until the 1990s.[116] Two of the photographs in the wall drawing are dated c.1903-1906 and

[114] Green, "ROCK," 38.
[115] *Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Claire Molloy*.
[116] Wallace, *A History of Namibia*, 175.

show African men and women (some possibly children) constructing a railroad. In one, a group of workers carries a metal bar above their heads. It seems that they are about to affix the metal down on the wooden slats that workers in front of them are laying out. The available evidence suggests that these are images of the forced labor performed by survivors of the genocide.

Figure 5 Unknown Photographer, *Tsumeb mine*, 1908. Included in Otobong Nkanga, *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*, 2015. Courtesy of Otobong Nkanga.

A photo from 1908 depicts hundreds of workers standing between gravel piles and mine machinery (figure 5). Workers closest to the camera face the photographer but behind them a large group walks with their backs to the viewer towards the mine shaft, and at the right-hand side several young men push carts along a raised track. The workers are visually enclosed by the tower stretching into the sky above, the gravel in front and the rail tracks extending out of the image to the right and left. They are ensnared within what Macarena Gomez-Barris refers to as an extractive zone: a site where colonial regimes of power and epistemologies "reduce life to capitalist resource conversion."[117] When Nkanga visited the mines, she imagined the experience of the laborers who worked it. She stated: "I started imagining how it must have felt for the locals to work under those conditions…what it meant to be underground, not seeing the sun and being in extreme heat and humidity.[118]

Jumping forward in time to the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the photographs show the miners better equipped, with leather boots, long jackets, and hard hats, but segregated from their few white counterparts by the apartheid laws that South Africa instituted throughout the South West Africa protectorate. Writing on the role of mining in the construction of South Africa, Achille Mbembe draws the connection between the superfluous raw material of gold, and the class of superfluous men created to extract this exchange commodity from underground. He argues that, "Racism's function was to institute a contradictory relation between the instrumentality of black life in the

[117] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, Dissident Acts (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.
[118] Nkanga, In Conversation at MIMA.

market sphere, on the one hand, and the constant depreciation of its value and its quality by the forces of commercialization and bigotry on the other."[119]

Figure 6 Unknown photographer, *Mass meeting of SWAPO*, November 11, 1977. National archives of Namibia. Included in Otobong Nkanga, *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*, 2015. Courtesy of Otobong Nkanga.

[119] Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (September 21, 2004): 380–81, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-373.

Mining operations were also a site of resistance against South African rule and apartheid: Tsumeb, along with other mines, was the site of several labor strikes before the labor movement coalesced into a nationalist freedom movement. Nkanga integrates this aspect of the history into the constellation of labor images at Tsumeb, with an image from a meeting of the South West African People's Organization in 1977 (figure 6). The photograph was taken over the shoulder of a person who stands with their back to the camera, arm raised to the sky. This photograph echoes the 1908 photograph in its composition, but with some important shifts. Here, a raised fist has taken the place of the tower, and the crowd, many raising their fists in response, expands beyond the frame of the photograph no longer visually captured within the extractive zone but moving outwards, beyond it. This photograph reminds the viewer that the history of Black power and African nationalism within Namibia and South Africa is also a part of Tsumeb's story.

The title of the exhibition and wall drawing, *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine* is Nigerian pidgin and translates to "take out your eyes and I will let you borrow mine," or, come see from my perspective. The perspective Nkanga offers here is one which moves between different times, scales, and representational strategies. The constellation of images in this wall drawing, reflect Nkanga's desire to "pay homage to that body that worked at Tsumeb."[120] The work attempts to visualize the underlying forces of desire and ways of abstracting and perceiving land that have resulted in the instrumentalization, fragmentation, and destruction of a mountain

[120] *Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Claire Molloy*.

alongside a history of genocide, forced labor, and apartheid for the communities who lived around it.

Choices "We" Make

Writing on artist Zina Saro-Wira's *Kariko Pipeline* (2016) Nomusa Makhubu states that "a violation of the land is experienced as a violation of the people" and explores the entangled fates of land and humans in the Niger delta.[121] In a similar vein, Nkanga investigates Tsumeb as a site whose reduction to extractable property is intertwined with the historical reduction of Herero, Nama and other peoples of the area to disposable impediments to possession and then extractable labor. Nkanga visually and conceptually links these distinct but intertwined processes of domination.

Nkanga's Tsumeb works are not unusual within her larger practice, which often explores specific historical and geographical landscapes and politics. In this next section, I look at several works outside the Tsumeb series which provide context and then consider how these, together with the Tsumeb works, can be read within current critiques of the Anthropocene discourse. I end by arguing that the Tsumeb works, particularly the double-sided tapestry *In Pursuit of Bling*, visualize a particular colonial and racialized mode of destruction, characteristic of the racial Capitalocene.

[121] Nomusa Makhubu, "The Poetics of Entanglement in Zina Saro-Wiwa's Food Interventions," *Third Text* 32, no. 2–3 (May 4, 2018): 182, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1476226.

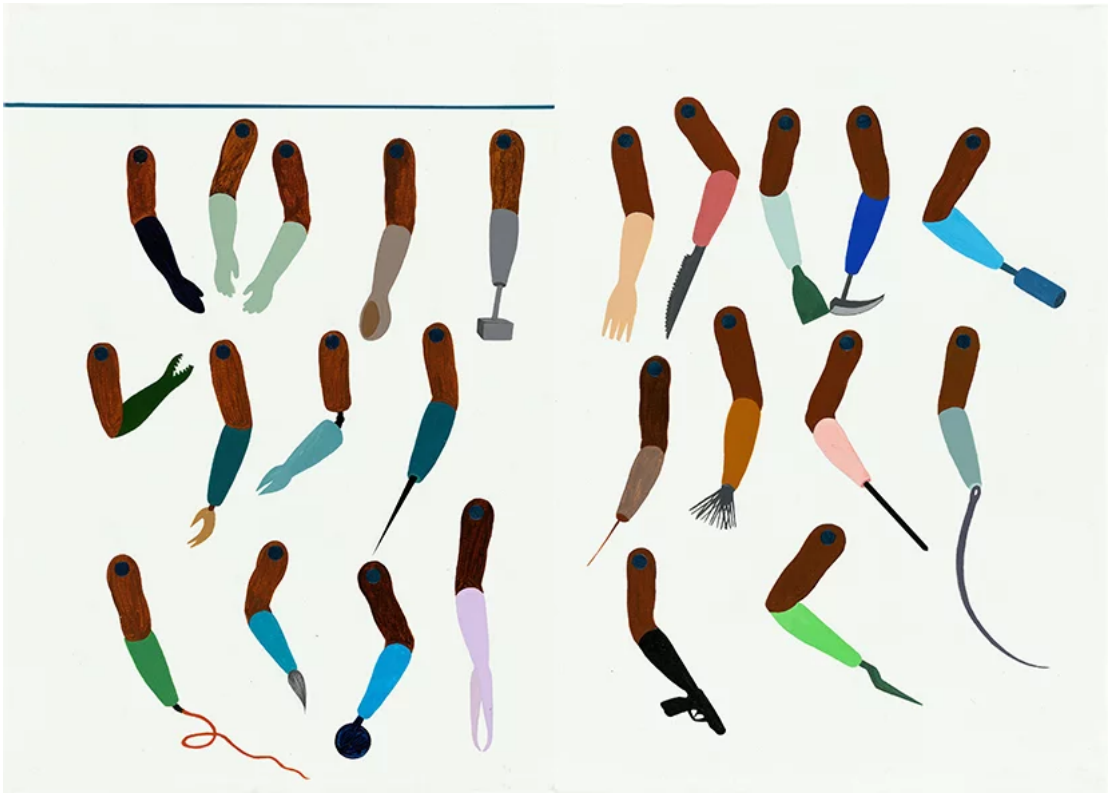

Figure 7 Otobong Nkanga, *Social Consequences I: Choices We Make*, 2009, acrylic and stickers on paper, two parts, 42 x 30 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

In much of her drawing, Catherine Wood points out, Nkanga "conjures an inversion of the typical European tradition of conceiving of figure separate from ground."[122] Instead, as with the first section of *Comot Your Eyes,* Nkanga's drawings often depict stylized bodies and detached limbs somehow entangled with the ground. These visual choices predate Nkanga's Tsumeb research, featuring prominently in works including two 2009-2010 series of drawings, *Social Consequences* and *Pointe Noire Fragments*. This second series was made during Nkanga's residency in Pointe

[122] Catherine Wood, "The Lady Who Swallowed a Rock," in *Otobong Nkanga: Uncertain Where the next Wind Blows*, ed. Tone Hansen and Karen Monica Reini (Köln: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2021), 77.

Noire, Congo, a busy oil port, and both the series show fragmented figures trapped in the systems of power to which their bodies and energy have become integral, but which are gradually destroying themselves and the land. *Social Consequences I: Choices We Make* (2009), depicts twenty-four brown arms, each with a colorful prosthetic that starts at the elbow (figure 7). For most of the arms, the hand is replaced by some form of tool such as a spoon, an axe, a rake, or scythe. One ends in a gun. In their flat, friendly pastels these removable limbs suggest a child's doll, a poster in a doctor's office, or drawings in schoolbooks—institutional and explanatory representations devoid of liveliness and agency. But the title, as well as the potential violence within some of the tools, points towards a sinister form of a mechanization of the human. Taking this mechanical ensnarement further, in *Pointe Noire Fragments—Black Gold Fever* (2009) a headless figure stands upon a fragment of mapped terrain leaning over a black structure piercing the earth. Where the left hand and forearm would be is a large spoon gathering liquid and where the right hand would be a spool of barbed wire encircles the gushing spout of liquid. Through these tools-cum-hands the body is inescapably tethered to the oil well.

Nkanga explores the idea of mechanization of the body in the Tsumeb series with the sculpture and performance *Solid Maneuvers* (2015). In the sculpture (which is often shown as a standalone piece), layered sheets of copper, brass, steel, acrylic, and aluminum that resemble slivers of terrain, balance precariously above the ground on large metal needles. Troughs within the landscape hold glitter, cosmetics, clay dust, vermiculite, and salt crystals. At the exhibition of *Solid Maneuvers* at Portikus

Gallery in 2015 the sculpture was exhibited as an archipelago of seven fragments of land, while in subsequent exhibitions a single land fragment has been exhibited. Nkanga designed the undulating shape of the landforms to fit around human bodies, following the waist or hips of herself or students she worked with at the Frankfurt Stadeschule while producing the works.[123] When first shown, the seven land fragments were each activated by one of the workshop participants and in subsequent exhibitions Nkanga herself has performed within the piece. Nkanga enacts seven different gestures with the loose materials held within the metal forms that are "very close to the actions of machines:" rubbing, swiping, stroking, pushing, dropping, clamping, and throwing.[124] The performance traces the movement from manual mining with a hand axe and a degree of precisions, to the more industrial mechanisms of cranes. The changing gestures marking historical shifts in technology also compress hundreds of years into a few minutes. She turns her body smoothly and steadily, her arms working in rhythm, up and down, sprinkling the bright dust. As she rotates, she says "You've learnt that gesture until you have become a machine. A machine that works slowly and does what it needs to do."[125] Nkanga becomes a part of the industrial process taking place within the scarred ground. The choices of the painting *Social Consequences-Choices We Mak*e could be these repetitive gestures that over time become the habit (or habitus) of the body. But there remains some

[123] Clare Molloy, Philippe Pirotte, and Fabian Schöneich, eds., *Otobong Nkanga: Luster and Lucre* (Frankfurt am Main: Sternberg Press, 2017), 103–5.
[124] Molloy, Nkanga, and Schöneich, "Intimate Connections," 167.
[125] *Otobong Nkanga - Bruises and Lustre*, 2015, https://vimeo.com/149753885.

ambiguity in *Solid Maneuvers* and *Choices We Make* about who is the "we" making choices and whose body is mechanized. Thinking back to the images of Namibian migrant laborers at the Tsumeb mine in *Comot Your Eyes*, the unequal distribution of accumulated wealth and bodily consequences becomes clearer.

In a 2018 article, historian Gabrielle Hecht asks "who exactly are 'we'?" in conversations about the Anthropocene.[126] Hecht contributes to a growing body of literature that critiques the use of the word "Anthropocene" because it implies all humans are equally to blame for the climate crisis or even that environmental destruction is an intrinsic part of human nature.[127] The particular argument of Hecht's article is that the "Anthropocene" comes into view very differently when considered with a focus on the history of colonialism and industrial mining in Africa. "Saying that 'we' move more rock than all natural processes combined doesn't even begin to capture these violent dynamics. Who actually moved the rock? How did this movement affect the people and ecosystems around the mines, not just at the time of extraction but decades later?"[128] These questions are always in the background of Nkanga's Tsumeb series, made present through the archival photographs of laborers

[126] Gabrielle Hecht, "If We Talk about Hurting 'Our' Planet, Who Exactly Is the 'We'?," *Aeon*, February 6, 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/if-we-talk-about-hurting-our-planet-who-exactly-is-the-we.
[127] A partial bibliography of which would include: Janae Davis et al., "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, … Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019): e12438, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438; Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*; Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–65; Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.
[128] Hecht, "If We Talk about Hurting 'Our' Planet, Who Exactly Is the 'We'?"

and her own documentation of the current site. Nkanga emphasizes that the laborers at Tsumeb had little choice in taking up their roles within the extractive process:

> You read stories of the Ovambo people that were starved because they refused to work for the Germans. They had to go back and work because the only way they could get food was by working in the mines. Therefore, by starving them and taking their lands so they could not farm, they had to eat what the Germans were producing for them.[129]

This quotation from Nkanga emphasizes the importance of access to land for survival and as a foundation for power.

Amongst the images that Nkanga took herself in Namibia are several photographs of a large black field of slag—the leftovers from 80 years of copper processing. One wide-angle image gives a sense of the vastness of this field as it dwarfs the chimney stacks of the processing plant and hundreds of small trees line the edge. The photograph communicates that the scale of this slag field is on par with the mountains that gently roll along the horizon line. The waste of the copper processing has become its own feature of the landscape. In a leaflet produced for the *Comot Your Eyes* exhibition, Nkanga records the words of Andre Neethling, a former managing director of the company that owned the Tsumeb mine, describing the pile. He states "When it's wet it is fine. But when it [the mining company] becomes redundant and there's no water it becomes a major dust hazard. So sometimes in winter it's this big, big cloud, it's wind-blown dust."[130] The pile is a health hazard to living beings, human and otherwise, within the vicinity.

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[129] Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Otobong Nkanga, "In Conversation," in *Otobong Nkanga: Uncertain Where the next Wind Blows*, ed. Tone Hansen and Karen Monica Reini (Köln: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2021), 118.
[130] Otobong Nkanga and Clare Molloy, "Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine" (Paris: Kadist, 2015).

Nkanga's photographs of the slag pile in Tsumeb bear a strong conceptual and formal relation to Congolese artist Sammy Baloji's *Essay on Urban Planning* (2013). Baloji's piece consists of a grid of twelve photographs, six of which are aerial views of Lubumbashi and six of which are photographs of flies and mosquitoes in the collections of the National Museum of Lubumbashi. Five of the aerial photographs draw attention to the city's green central corridor which is the footprint of the colonial cordon sanitaire that segregated the African and European parts of the city. In the sixth image, a black, mountainous slag pile dominates the frame, making clear its presence within the city. In her analysis of this artwork, Rachel Nelson connects the slag pile, the cordon sanitaire, and the collection of flies to the colonial management of space, the environment, and human health. Nelson writes: "As Baloji visualizes how the colonial production of space and people informs the present, then, the current insistent entanglement between governance driven by economic exploitation and environmental destruction actually seems to be inevitable."[131] Nkanga's work, like Baloji's, examines the way that the colonial production of space and people inform the exploitative economics and environmental crisis of the present. In both artists' work, the slag pile is a piece of visual evidence, a looming presence connecting choices and consequences across time.

[131] Nelson, "At the Edge of Ruin," 190.

Figure 8 Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling: The Transformation*, 2014. Woven textile (viscose, wool, mohair and organic cotton). 182 x 180cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Nkanga and Baloji's artworks visualize a dynamic of what Françoise Vergès terms the racial Capitalocene. In her analysis Vergès asks:

> What connection can be made between the Western conception of nature as "cheap" and the global organization of a "cheap," racialized, disposable workforce…? What methodology is needed to write a history of the environment that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and

> racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into "cheap" objects of commerce…?[132]

As Vergès' continued use of the word "cheap" suggests, this is a question about who and what is valued within prevailing economic and political systems. In the words of Katheryn Yusoff, "coloniality cuts across both flesh and earth in the economies of valuation it established."[133] Nkanga makes the cutting across of flesh and earth visual and literal in the tapestry *In Pursuit of Bling: The Transformation* (2014) (figure 8). This tapestry is the back side of the piece *In Pursuit of Bling: The Discovery*, discussed earlier. Turning again to the visual language of scientific illustrations, Nkanga has woven the bottom half of two orange-brown bodies, emerging from a pile of uncut diamonds. Three platforms balance atop the two truncated forms, carrying diamonds, chunks of land and a chemical compound model that resembles the silicate structure of mica. Because of the flattened, almost clinical style of the tapestry's design, the violence of these images is not immediately apparent, mirroring a way in which scientific or academic language can obscure the brutality of a subject. Where the images from the Namibian archives point to the relationship between race and mining at the economic or macro level, this tapestry makes a connection between them at an ontological level. Nkanga's figures are flat and truncated. Their own holistic being has been curtailed and dematerialized for the production of diamonds and chemical knowledge. Just as the land was abstracted on *The Discovery* side of the Tapestry, here humans are abstracted into matter. The double-sidedness of this

[132] Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," 73.
[133] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 32.

tapestry resonates with the arguments of Mary Louise Pratt in her study of eighteenth and nineteenth century European colonial travel writing. Pratt observes:

> The normalizing, generalizing voice of the ethnographic manners-and-customs portraits is distinct from, but complementary to, the landscape narrator. Both are authorized by the global project of natural history: one produces land as landscape and territory, scanning for prospects; the other produces the indigenous inhabitants as bodyscapes, scanned also for prospects. Together, they dismantle the socioecological web that preceded them and install a Euro-colonial discursive order whose territorial and visual forms of authority are those of the modern state. Abstracted away from the landscape that is under contention, indigenous peoples are abstracted away from the history that is being made—a history into which Europeans intend to reinsert them as an exploited labor pool.[134]

Nkanga's tapestry of fractured land and truncated bodies weaves together these distinct but related forms of prospecting. In this tapestry, we are invited to see both humans and the land as separated from the holistic web of life in the name of mineral extraction—rendered as atoms, as matter, rather than beings.[135] To see humans from this geologic and atomized perspective is brutally dehumanizing. This is the perspective of the racial Capitalocene. And though Nkanga's work under discussion focuses on the consequences of this perspective for laborers at Tsumeb, racial capitalism weaves a wider web, as I will discuss in the next two sections

Desire & Visual Pleasure

In this section, I complicate my argument by exploring how Nkanga represents desire and pleasure in relationship to the minerals of Tsumeb. I argued above that the first panel of *Comot Your Eyes* was a way to visualize desire as a force that initiated the processes of abstraction and extraction. Here, I look more closely at how Nkanga

[134] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Second edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 63.
[135] The form of abstraction I am drawing attention to here is one of the reasons I am uncomfortable with analyses of Nkanga's work that move too quickly to consider human beings as matter.

visualizes and performs desire, consumption, and visual pleasure in several Tsumeb works and her larger oeuvre. My contention in this section is that Nkanga explores the role of a desiring body in the types of networks and systems that produce the exploitations of racial capitalism addressed above.

Figure 9 Otobong Nkanga, Still from *Diaoptasia*, 2015, streamed performance recorded at Tate. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/bmw-tate-live-2015/bmw-tate-live-performance-room-otobong-nkanga. Courtesy of the artist.

The performance *Diaoptasia* (2015) was livestreamed in a room with a set but no physical audience, giving Nkanga an opportunity to tightly control the viewer's perspective.[136] It begins with the camera focused on the artist's headdress. The crown-like array is inspired by intricate hairstyles from 1960s Nigeria, but hair is here replaced by tightly wrapped copper wire.[137] Within the headdress nestle rocks of

[136] *Diaoptasia Performance*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR8_t1AM0dw.

[137] See the photos of J.D. Okhai Ojeikere (1930-2014) for examples.

varying types and sizes, including blue-green dioptase, another copper-carbonate found at Tsumeb. She removes one rock and slowly moves it down towards her mouth and appears to swallow the rock whole (figure 9). A hand-written title screen that reads "From where I Stand I see you South" moves in front of the artist, who then reappears in front of a large black and white photograph of the scarred walls of a mine at Tsumeb. Nkanga then recites a poem while her body appears in fragments. Her hands sprinkle eyeshadow and clay dust, pulled from within a large white and blue paper sculpture the shape of an uncut crystal that hangs in front of her body: a shape Pahl describes as "crystal pregnant belly or mineralized sexual organ or drum."[138]

Figure 10 Otobong Nkanga, Still from *Diaoptasia*, 2015 streamed performance recorded at Tate. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/bmw-tate-live-2015/bmw-tate-live-performance-room-otobong-nkanga. Courtesy of the artist.

[138] Pahl, "Improbable Intimacy," 259.

Nkanga then appears holding two sharp metal needles the size of drumsticks, and as she sings a dirge in Pidgin English, she rhythmically jams the needles into the paper sculpture, piercing it towards her own body (figure 10). In the question-and-answer period after the performance, Nkanga stated:

> When I sing in Pidgin English it excludes some people and includes other people. I was thinking also of how the language is also fractured. It's been hacked and broken, turned, and then it becomes something else. Which is also a way of resistance. Or way of finding another solution to a language that may be, may not be your own choice, or that you don't feel comfortable with.[139]

By using Nigerian Pidgin English, Nkanga decenters English as the de facto language of the international contemporary artworld and draws attention to the linguistic resistance and creativity of Pidgin.To end the performance, Nkanga pokes the large needles through her headdress and leaves them precariously balanced there.

As mentioned above, one of the ways Nkanga makes visible the force of desire in her paintings and wall drawings is through sharp lines—a mode of representation similar to the lines that designate a chemical bond of attraction or a vector of force. By making them into needles, the images render the potential disfigurement of desire which, beyond the control of a desiring subject, might attach her into a web of machinery. The desiring lines proliferate, and the subject is caught. In *Diaoptasia* these needles move from a visual metaphor for force into a tool that Nkanga wields towards herself—though she never pierces herself, the possibility lingers

[139] *Tate Live*.

uncomfortably as she repeatedly stabs the insubstantial paper form in front of her stomach.

The lust for sparkle is in part about the desire to be lusted after, something which Nkanga alludes to through her use of makeup in various Tsumeb works and her adornment of her own body in glitter. Nkanga explores bodily and sexual pleasure in her paintings, including the earlier series *Pleasure Series* (2001), *Pleasure Fragments* (2002) and *Awaiting Pleasures* (2002), and the artist book *Shift and Wait* (2003) which explore the physical borders and pleasures of human bodies in relationship to one another (ranging from explicitly engaging in intercourse to holding hands) or alone. Several of these earlier paintings introduce needles and piercing as motifs related to desire and pleasure. In more recent paintings such as *Powerplay* (2011), *Living in a Bubble* (2012) and *Harvesting Pleasures* (2012) sexual scenes reappear within Nkanga's more recent visual language of fragments of land and networks built around disembodied arms or torsos. Bodily desire, the paintings suggest, are at least one part of these larger land-moving systems.

I read Nkanga's explorations of bodily desire within these systems as an evocation of what Kathryn Yusoff calls "the libidinal economy of geology"—an embodied desire for gems and precious metals that can be obscured by the accounting and analysis of minerals.[140] Nkanga's interactions with the minerals, whether as rocks or glitter, often emphasize sensuality, though in a mode that also points to the dangers of such allure. In several of the Tsumeb works, the luxuries of shine are hypnotic,

[140] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 7.

ensnaring Nkanga's body in a process of industrialization and consumption that degrades her humanity through making her more machinelike (in the case of *Solid Maneuvers*) or exposes her to violence (in *Diaoptasia*). Her imagined geophagy in *Diaoptasia* is shocking and potentially dangerous—an extreme form of consumption. Writing on luxury, Dean Mathiowetz argues that, more than just a form of excess, luxury always retains a relation to the sensing body. "For this body, sensation and the opportunity for pleasure that it presents is deeply woven with the satisfaction of needs, including other-directed needs for recognition, for esteem, and even for superordination."[141] Mathiowetz argues that rather than just a visual display of power, luxuries convey a personal and sensual pleasure which is tied to the feelings of superiority and domination that affording such luxuries suggests. Nkanga's insistent embodiment of the process of desiring the gems as beautiful, bodily, and violent, has hints of the dangerous potentials of such desires if allowed to proliferate.

Nkanga's construction of tapestries within the Tsumeb work further emphasize the connections between visual seduction, luxury, and superordination. The tapestry *The Weight of Scars* (2015), focuses attention on the fissures and flotsam left in the wake of mining (figure 11). The image shows two dislocated bodies pulling against a constellation of black and white photographs, linked by lines of silver thread. Fifty-two colors of viscose, wool, mohair, and cotton went into the painterly abundance of turquoise, cerulean and taupe that make up the tapestry. The planes of mottled color

[141] D. P. Mathiowetz, "Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of Touch," *Theory and Event* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 27, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/08s6849x.

are interrupted by lines that could represent cracks, edges, or contours. The space that Nkanga creates in this image encompasses both the variations on a mineral's surface, and a sweeping view of the Earth from far above, asking the viewer to think about the relationship between the macro and micro views. How do perspectives and actions at the microscopic or local scale inflect outcomes at a systemic or international scale, and vice versa?

Figure 11 Otobong Nkanga, *The Weight of Scars*, 2015, Woven textile (acrylic, linen, mohair, organic, cotton, polyester, viscose), and 10 inkjet photographs printed on Forex plates. 4 parts, 253 x 153 cm each. Photo by Christine Clinckx. Courtesy of the artist.

The overall design of this tapestry is similar to the layout of archival photographs in the wall drawing *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*, but more explicitly references a chemical compound model such as the one seen in the tapestry *In Pursuit of Bling: The Transformation*. Here, the attached photographs are ones Nkanga took in Namibia, showing glimpses of the abandoned mines including cracks on the ground, a square shaft, and a pipeline stretching into the distance, In her sketch notes

for the tapestry, she labels each of the black and white prints as a ruin.[142] These ruins together form the constellation or compound which the bodies at either end of the tapestry hold up, engaging in a tug of war. Whether they control the system or are part of it is left ambiguous, as is their racial and gender identity: the bodies are merely dark blue legs with multiple attached limbs in many shades of brown, peach, tan, and ochre. Where the wall drawing focused on the historical human costs for Namibians of abstracting and extracting the land, here the tapestry focuses on the damage to the ground of Tsumeb by fragmented and abstracted humans.

Nkanga's use of tapestry as a medium, draws from both African and European traditions in which fabrics have served as a means of visual pleasure and a mode of communication. In particular, the thickness and weight of the pieces, the narrative scenes, and the opulent use of metallic threads reflect tapestries made in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands to adorn wealthy homes across Europe in the 15th through 18th centuries.[143] Tapestries within this tradition are an appropriate material for reflecting on the excess and superordination of luxury. Such tapestries were historically very costly to produce, requiring large investments and access to capital to pay for space and weavers as well as high quality wool, silk and "precious silver and gilt-metal-wrapped threads that created a glittering effect when lit by flickering

[142] Anne Barlow, *Otobong Nkanga: From Where I Stand* (Tate Publishing, 2019), 38–39.
[143] Stephanie Bailey and Otobong Nkanga, "Otobong Nkanga in Conversation," *Ocula*, January 6, 2018, https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/otobong-nkanga/.

candles."[144] As this description of glittering fabrics suggests, tapestries were sites of "endless visual pleasure and markers of opulence" for the aristocracy of Europe.[145] Nkanga's tapestries similarly use metallic and glittering threads to seduce the viewer. In addition to cost, because tapestries were portable, they could be used as diplomatic gifts or hung in different rooms at specific times to enclose the physical space in narratives of the owner's choosing and convey, through material and image, messages of power and prestige. Considering these narrative and decorative purposes of tapestries historically, Nkanga's use of the medium here presents the scarring of land and the mechanization of bodies as a background against which the lives and luxuries of others, far away from the site of extraction, unfold.

Nkanga is far from the only contemporary artist turning to this historically rich medium. K.L.H. Wells argues that "the appeal of tapestry for contemporary artists, curators, critics, and collectors rests in the medium's insistent materiality, because this seems to counter the relative immateriality of globalization."[146] To make this argument, Wells examines the discussions of material and production surrounding tapestries designed by contemporary artists such as Alighiero Boetti, William Kentridge, Chuck Close, and Goshka Macuga. As with many of Nkanga's other tapestries, *The Weight of Scars* was fabricated at the TextielLab, a professional textile workspace housed within the TextielMuseum in Tilburg, the Netherlands (itself, the

[144] Koenraad Brosens, "Tapestry," in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 297, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118391488.ch14.
[145] Brosens, 298.
[146] K. L. H. Wells, "Laboring Under Globalization: Tapestries by Contemporary Artists," *Art Journal* 77, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 28, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2018.1549874.

site of a textile factory). Unlike any of the artists in Well's article, Nkanga regularly discusses and shares images of her process at the TextielLab, in which digital designs are translated into material objects via industrial scale weaving machines. She also participates closely in the choices made at the lab, rather than outsourcing this labor at a distance. However, Wells argument about the materiality of tapestry holds true for the reception of Nkanga's work. Wells suggests, tapestries, even digitally produced ones, continue to "dazzle" because "their aura derives from a continuing association of tapestry with craft."[147] This fascination with the labor-intensive materiality of tapestry was particularly visible in the Tate St Ives exhibition of the Tsumeb works, where a sample strip of *The Weight of Scars* was exhibited along with the finished work, with a sign that read "please touch." Viewers were thus invited to both visually and haptically appreciate the material complexity of the tapestry—to be seduced by the very material opulence and shine that Nkanga explores through the rocks of Tsumeb.

The visual pleasure which draws viewers to Nkanga's tapestries is part of what keeps those viewers within the circuits of power and capital under discussion. Contemporary art is itself the sort of luxury commodity (or bling, to use Nkanga's language) which satisfies both visual pleasure and, potentially, a sense of superordination for those who own it. Works by established artists may be considered both "a trophy" and "an essential part of a wealth-management offering."[148] For

[147] Wells, 44.
[148] Harriet Sherwood, "'The Rich Have Got Much Richer': Why Art Sale Prices Are Going through the Roof," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2022, sec. Art and design,

example, in May 2022 individual pieces by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol sold for $85 million and $195 million respectively.[149] While artists themselves are rarely the beneficiaries of these sort of sums, artists, curators, scholars, museum staff, and critics are part of this network of wealth accumulation.[150] Nkanga's work both participates in and troubles these pleasures.

The Embodied Landscape

Thus far I have argued that Nkanga's work looks at the colonial roots of industrial extraction and the intertwined fates of land and people in Tsumeb, inviting reflection on how forms of pleasure, including visual pleasure, are tied into the cycles of destruction and desire that fuel continuing extraction. However, Nkanga's lyricism and careful consideration of the stones also look for a possibility beyond the extractive view. In this last section, I consider Nkanga's alternative approach to being in relationship with the materials and space of Tsumeb and argue that by engaging her own body in new rituals of touch, gesture, and song Nkanga offers an interconnected understanding of being human.

Remains of the Green Hill (2015) begins in the dark, with a male voice speaking in English: "The Tsumeb mine is probably the most sought-after deposit of these sort of crystals in the world." This voice is Andre Neethling, former managing

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https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/may/20/the-rich-have-got-much-richer-why-art-sale-prices-are-going-through-the-roof; "Art & Finance" (Deloitte, ArtTactic, 2021), https://www2.deloitte.com/lu/en/pages/art-finance/articles/art-finance-report.html.

[149] Sherwood, "'The Rich Have Got Much Richer.'"

[150] For a discussion of possible routes to making resales of art more equitable see Cheryl Finley et al., "The Recent Sale of Amy Sherald's 'Welfare Queen' Symbolizes the Urgent Need for Resale Royalties and Economic Equity for Artists," *Artnet News*, November 22, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/opinion/amy-sheralds-welfare-queen-resale-royalties-economic-equity-artists-2037904.

director of Ongolopolo Mining (formerly Tsumeb Corporation Limited), which previously ran the Tsumeb Mine. As his voice continues, describing the importance and abundance of the mine, an image of the Tsumeb pit appears. It has been drastically transformed from the archival images of the undulating mound of the "green hill." The only green now comes from the vegetation that grows around the edges and has begun to move cautiously down the sides. The rock itself appears only in shades of tawny brown and pale grey.

Figure 12 Otobong Nkanga, still from *Remains of the Green Hill*, 2015. HD video with sound, 5:48 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Neethling's voiceover continues for four minutes. He states that he has been working in the mining industry in Namibia for about 50 years and is optimistic that the industry can improve its relationship to the environment. Though he acknowledges the history of exploitation, he implies that it was a necessary step in industrial progress and then quickly moves to criticizing Namibians—whether the

government, business owners, or mine workers is unclear—for having an unproductive attitude, echoing colonial self-justifications. Neethling fails to acknowledge the ongoing environmental legacies of mining or the extreme income and wealth inequality which persists in post-apartheid Namibia.

While Neethling's speech plays, Nkanga performs at the pit. When we first see her, she bows towards the mine and then a stone bounces up the rocky outcrop, across Nkanga's back and onto her head. With this single stone balanced in place, she moves to stand on one leg and shifts through several poses—performing a balancing act with the landscape (figure 12). Over the course of the video more rocks defy gravity and fly up into her grasp until Nkanga has several stacked upon her head and one in each hand. Once Neethling's monologue ends, we begin to hear birds and insects, as well as Nkanga singing to the rocks, while the light dims and the sky turns purple. She vocalizes sounds without words, in long, calming notes as the screen once again fades into black.

Nkanga's slow performance of balance and song contrasts strongly with Neethling's language of industrialization, development, and regulations. While watching, it becomes apparent that the image of what looks to be rocks flying up is instead those stones falling to the ground, and what appears to be sunset must in fact be sunrise. In playing the footage backwards, Nkanga invites the possibility of seeing the rocks as lively and responsive as well as of seeing time move in reverse. It suspends the viewer in a moment which is both sunset and sunrise, a beginning and an end. This temporary disorientation of temporality contrasts with the linear

narrative of inevitability and progress given by Neethling who "smooths tales of profit and exploitation into progress and discovery."[151]

Before further analyzing Nkanga's performance within the video, it is necessary to address the formal construction of the single shot, which echoes conventions of European landscape imagery. Several scholars have argued that the visual tradition of European landscape painting from the 15th through 18th centuries produced a separation between viewer and environment and implied a domination of the viewer over the pictured land.[152] For example, Denis Cosgrove connects the development of perspective as a way of depicting space to the mercantilism of Renaissance Italy.[153] The construction of the scene in *Remains of the Green Hill* conforms specifically to several conventions of a picturesque image as set forth in 1792 by British artist and writer William Gilpin. Krista Thompson succinctly describes these as "a background area, a strongly lit middle distance with two side screens (such as opposite riverbanks), a darkened foreground with elements that framed the image like a stage set or 'an amphitheatre.'"[154] The picturesque image also often contained rustic architecture or ruins. Here, the quarry and the green bushes in the foreground create an amphitheater which frames the scene for the viewer and the structures of the now

[151] Nkanga and Molloy, "Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine."
[152] This is discussed in more depth in the introduction to this dissertation. Examples include: Cosgrove, "Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea"; Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape"; Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*.
[153] Cosgrove, "Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea," 50.
[154] In her use of the term amphitheatre, Thompson quotes Gilpin. Krista A. Thompson, "An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque," January 1, 2006, 35, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388562.

defunct mine take the place of the castle ruins and church steeples which often populated the background of picturesque landscape paintings. Anne Bermingham identifies the ideological underpinnings of the picturesque as "a strong commitment to the economic order of the present [agricultural industrialization] expressed as a nostalgia for the past."[155] When translated to British colonies, the picturesque "allowed travelers to see unusual and unknown forms of landscape but to engage with them (to 'know' them or make them known and knowable to a European audience) through the application of familiar terms and conventions."[156] Put more bluntly, picturesque images (and descriptions) enabled colonists to aestheticize and reinforce ownership of land and in many cases, people. For example, Charmaine Nelson argues that in seventeenth century Jamaica "planters also used the picturesque to produce distance between themselves and the reality of the oppression to which they subjected their slaves."[157] Nkanga's image of the pit uses familiar picturesque structures to draw attention to the devastating consequences of those attitudes. It could be argued that Nkanga is aestheticizing the destruction of the mine, but unlike the traditional picturesque which often hid the injustices of the present, Nkanga focuses her camera on a site of destruction with detritus clearly present. The image she creates brings into visibility the consequences of mining that would otherwise go unseen by many viewers. This is particularly reinforced in the context of an installation of the Tsumeb

[155] Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 77.
[156] John McAleer, *Representing Africa: Landscape, Exploration and Empire in Southern Africa, 1780-1870*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 61.
[157] Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*, 202.

works. For example, when this video is shown as part of *Tsumeb Fragments* (2015) (figure 13) alongside a slab of cement (figure 14), she invites a viewer in the Global North into seeing "the correlation between the hole [in Namibia] and the buildings that they're living in."[158]

Figure 13 Otobong Nkanga, *Tsumeb Fragments*, 2015. Powder coated steel; cement with malachite, azurite and mica; electromagnet; copper; photographs; inkjet prints on Galala limestone and inkjet prints on acrylic glass on lightbox; HD monitor with headphones. Photo by Oliver Cowling. Courtesy of the artist.

[158] Molloy, Nkanga, and Schöneich, "Intimate Connections," 177.

Figure 14 Otobong Nkanga, *Tsumeb Fragments*, 2015 (detail). Cement, modular structure, and Tsumeb minerals. Photo by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the picturesque tradition, with Nkanga standing on a rocky outcrop with her back to the viewer the scene resembles Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). In this painting, a white man in a dark coat stands in the center of the frame looking over a dramatic vista of mist and mountains. Malcolm Andrews writes of this image: "The arresting urbanity of the man's clothing and slim cane marks him off as something wholly alien to this environment."[159] He goes on: "The gulf—literalized in the painting—between the human and the vast world of nature fascinated the Romantics."[160] Friedrich's image exemplifies the Romantic

[159] Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 143.
[160] Andrews, 145.

conception of the nonhuman world as fundamentally Other: uncontrollable, immense, beyond reason. In her MA Thesis, Sanne Kanters argues that the differences between Nkanga's composition and Friedrich's emphasizes Nkanga's position *within* the environment as opposed to above it.[161] Kanters goes on to argue that this offers a "deconstruction of the normative Humanist subject," referring to an anthropocentric Humanism as critiqued by Rosi Braidotti.[162] However, within the context of a formerly colonized site and thinking through the perspective of racial capitalism, it is important to clarify who is included within "the normative Humanist subject." Friedrich's image exemplifies what philosopher Sylvia Wynter identifies as the "ethnoclass (i.e. Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."[163] This category is exclusionary and "always produces other humans or less than fully human figures."[164] Seeing the people who inhabited Tsumeb as outside the category of Man justified the genocide that preceded the destruction of the site and undergirds the ongoing violence of racial capitalism globally. Nkanga's placement of herself within the landscape, alluding as it does to these traditions, critiques a conception of the human which has historically aimed to dominate the land and also violently excluded Black and African women such as herself.

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[161] Kanters, "Life in Ruins. Thinking through the Geological Reformation of the Human Subject with Otobong Nkanga's Remains of the Green Hill," 33–35.
[162] Kanters, 36.
[163] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.
[164] King, *The Black Shoals*, 17.

Nkanga's performance further emphasizes a less hierarchical and distanced approach to human-earth relationships. Touch and physical connection with the materials play an important role in Nkanga's interactions. I suggested in the previous section that the invitation to touch the tapestry pointed to the seduction of the materiality. One of the reasons this curatorial choice stood out is because touch is not generally encouraged in art museums. In the words of curator Jen Budney speaking of the way museums (particularly EuroAmerican ones) treat various objects looted by colonists and appropriated as art: "in museums these objects have been displayed for edification through the eyes alone."[165] One of the starting points for Nkanga's research into Tsumeb was the collections of minerals and crystals in European museums as specimens and Nkanga often displays her photographs from these collections as part of Tsumeb installations or exhibitions. In these images, the rocks are in solitary fragments, labeled and stored in boxes. In Nkanga's interactions, by contrast, the rocks are gathered, placed against flesh, or even "swallowed." In *Remains of the Green Hill*, Nkanga balances rocks on top of each other and then performs her own series of careful balance moves. This requires her to attune to the shape and weight of each rock in relationship to the others and to her own body. It requires a careful attention. And after the performance is over, the rocks are left to roll away.

[165] Jen Budney, "Other Ways of Knowing," in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, ed. Franklin Sirmans, Illustrated edition (Houston, Tex. : New Haven: The Menil Collection, 2008), 40.

Nkanga also redefines her relationship to the Tsumeb landscape by treating the pit as her audience. Nkanga states: "[what] I am interested in is not necessarily performing to just human beings in art spaces, but also performing for other places, like the mines, to find ways of appeasing or find ways of healing in the spaces, or just to have a conversation with the spaces."[166] As Nkanga sings, the rocks jump towards her and it is possible to suspend disbelief and see the rocks as responding to Nkanga's melody, attracted by the care she projects into the void. Nkanga's performance for the scarred land was improvised and what the viewer sees in *Remains of the Green Hill* doesn't have any words, implying that rather than the lyrics, it is the sound, the hum, that matters. Nkanga says: "I am interested in finding out whether a voice or a song can heal. When you put out certain sound waves—like a mother's soothing voice—what can they do?"[167] Artist Sonia Boyce also explores the potential of singing and vocalization in her piece *Exquisite Cacophony* (2015). For this work Boyce filmed an improvised multivocal collaboration between the vocal and movement artist Elaine Mitchener and hip-hop artist Astronautolis that drew from jazz scat singing and Dadaist noise performances. In the catalogue for the 2015 Venice Biennale, where the piece was first shown, Laura Cassidy Rogers writes: "Both idioms [of jazz and Dadaist noise] depart from reason and logic as the mainstays of dominant political regimes and insist that vocal improvisation is a strategic means of autonomy and resistance."[168] Nkanga's tonal singing, like the vocal explorations of Mitchener and

[166] Nkanga, In Conversation at MIMA.
[167] Barlow and Nkanga, "Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Anne Barlow," 59.
[168] Enwezor, *All the Worlds Futures: La Biennale de Venizia, 56th Edition, Short Guide*, 202–3.

Astronautolis, communicates beyond the constrictions of language or rational meaning, instead allowing an embodied communion with the space of the pit.

Nkanga's singing in the Tsumeb works (she sings in *Diaptasia* as well as *Remains of the Green Hill*) creates a sense of a ritual space. Nkanga sang in a church choir when growing up and this may inform her use of song.[169] Along similar lines, Nkanga's ritualized geophagy in *Diaptasia* could be read as an act of communion, a way in which she takes the rocks into her body out of respect and love. Speaking in an interview about performance, Nkanga stated:

> For me the gesture of repetition becomes embodied. It becomes normal. It becomes a ritual. It becomes a place where you wake up and your body immediately stands up and does it, and it makes me understand why it was so important within the quest of colonialism to subdue the ritual, to kill performativity, to erase certain things that remind you that you are and you exist through this, and to start bringing in other kinds of rituals that would make you believe that this is what it is and to make your forget what you were.[170]

Neither gesture, movement, nor song are inherently anti-capitalist or decolonial, but if in pieces like *Solid Maneuvers* or *Choices We Make*, Nkanga meditates on the consequences of absorbing the repetitive gestures and rituals of capitalist extraction, in works like *Remains of the Green Hill* she tries to find alternative gestures and rituals. In this case, the performance also reshapes who or what is considered an audience—the pit and minerals are imagined as agents.

Several of Nkanga's explorations of Tsumeb also unsettle the boundaries of the human. For example, Nkanga's illusion of geophagy in *Diaptasia* is a reminder that

[169] Ndikung and Nkanga, "In Conversation," 130.
[170] Ndikung and Nkanga, 130–31.

human and stone are made of some of the same elements—elements that, looking from the perspective of millennia, move between living and non-living forms. Nkanga states:

> Let's go to a place of generations and generations and millions and millions of years of bodies that have decayed, that have entered the soil, that have been melted through volcanic actions, or through compressions, or through acidic waters from rain and all that compressing and decaying of the material, and then over time this material has given a form to a mineral, to boglands or to stones or to salt."[171]

From this timescale the experiences of the earth and the human body are not only interdependent but the boundaries between the living and non-living become more fluid. Nkanga says: "When I talk about bodies, I am also talking about water bodies, trees, soil, different kinds of elements and non-living and living beings on this planet."[172] Nkanga's imagining of the earth as body is further emphasized by her description of entering a mine shaft at Tsumeb: "We entered the mine through a shaft, and it was dripping with water as if the stones were crying. It was moist, as if we were moving through a vein that had been cut."[173]

Nkanga's approach to reframing the human in this series is intertwined with her approach to the senses. Katrin Pahl observes that *Diaoptasia* is a composite of the Greek roots *dia* (through) and *optos* (visible) and that "its extravagant suffix makes it resonate with fantasia… 'Diaoptasia' thus functions as a technology for new ways of sensing, seeing, and experiencing—a work of art that enhances our sensorium."[174]

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[171] Ndikung and Nkanga, 114.
[172] Nkanga, In Conversation at MIMA.
[173] Barlow and Nkanga, "Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Anne Barlow," 58.
[174] Pahl, "Improbable Intimacy," 261.

This idea could be used to describe many of Nkanga's works as she probes new ways to sense and be in relationship to the minerals. Nkanga says: "When you start dissecting a stone, you don't see the beauty of it anymore; when you start prodding it, you stop seeing it."[175] Nkanga's statement on seeing retains a hopefulness about vision—that a form of looking could be an act of careful and caring attention rather than an act of consumption. Instead of enacting the position of what Cosgrove calls "the sovereign eye," distanced from and dominating the earth and rocks, Nkanga performs a more fleshy and vulnerable position, putting lips, hands, and skin on the stones. With gentle touch, warm song, and other forms of embodied relationality, Nkanga attempts to see, know, and feel the ground and the minerals that comprise it, as a fellow body.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Nkanga's Tsumeb works offer a historically situated critique of racial capitalism and investigate the roles of visual pleasure and desire within this political formation. I have further argued that Nkanga's work explores modes of being and attention that might move beyond this predominant value system and the way being human is imagined within it. Pieces such as *Comot Your Eyes* and *Remains of the Green Hill* acknowledge not only the dangers of an anthropocentric and capitalist view of the world that sees the land as a resource rather than a fellow body, but also point to the ways that colonial and racist ideas have been integral to the enactment of these forms of destruction.

[175] *Otobong Nkanga in Conversation with Claire Molloy*.

Though, as I have discussed, the effects of the racial Capitalocene are not felt by all people equally, the processes of objectification and extraction are having profound and troubling consequences across peoples and geographies. As Nkanga's works deftly visualize, the hands pulling the levers of the machines are also disembodied and mechanized. At a talk for a UK museum audience, Nkanga stated:

> Colonizing 150 countries, what does that mean? So, the scar is within this place and it's also within the places of infliction. The scar is within the places where you need to constantly have power but at the same time you know that that power has its limit…For me that scar and that notion of appeasement does not only relate to that landscape and the different elements, but it also relates to the psychological states that we are all in."[176]

While making clear the historical specificities of different experiences and responsibilities within the legacies of colonialism and their contemporary manifestations, Nkanga's renderings of fragmented landscapes and ensnared bodies suggest that wherever the minerals have travelled—to cathedrals, skyscrapers, cosmetics, electronic devices, kitchen appliances, or nuclear weapons to name just some of the end points—people are implicated in and damaged by these systems.

[176] Nkanga, In Conversation at MIMA.

2. Pan-Africanism, Geopoetics, and Erasure in the work of Dineo Seshee Bopape

Figure 15 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars), Sketch no. 22*, 2019, Mixed media installation, Variable dimensions, Installation view The South African Pavillion, La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

Representing South Africa in the 2019 Venice Biennale, Dineo Seshee Bopape exhibited *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars), Sketch no22* (2019) (figure 15). For this expansive installation, Bopape laid down a blue tarpaulin on the floor and built upon it several large platforms made of mud and dried grass, carefully adorned with shells of varying shapes and sizes, small stones, leaves, charcoal, twigs cast in brass, and large pieces of batiked fabric. Indents into the surface of one of the larger clay cubes suggested the artist had pressed her fist into it forcefully and

repeatedly. Between these larger soil and clay structures, Bopape laid out piles of black charcoal, balls of dried mud dusted with red pigment, and circles of pale pink gravel. In the center of the work, an approximately 5-foot-tall post emerged from a small mud and tile square, with a white handkerchief pinned to the top, decorated with dried leaves and flowers. Bopape covered the closest windows of the building with a translucent layer of plastic, creating a perpetual state of semi-darkness in which a constellation of small lights barely illuminated the work. The space felt cool and smelled like damp clay; a calm sanctuary from the heat and the crowds of the Biennale. Walking the edge of the installation, I watched ants crawling through the dirt and gnats fly around the handkerchief, becoming temporary participants.

Over the last five years Dineo Seshee Bopape's diffuse and multi-faceted installations have revolved around two centers of gravity: an ethic of attention to what one might call nature—soil, oceans, plants, air—and the histories and presents of Black Liberation struggles. In this chapter, through close readings of multiple installations executed between 2016 and 2020, I consider how and why Bopape's two concerns intersect. Bopape's large slabs of soil summon the ongoing debate over land rights and land redistribution, a key point of fissure and tension in contemporary South African politics and an issue that is inextricable from the history of capitalist extraction, colonialism, and white nationalism in the state.[177] But her practice also ties

[177]This debate within South Africa has also become a coordinate within racist discourse in the U.S. For example on August 22, 2018 Donald Trump retweeted lies about the "mass killing of white farmers." Jason Burke and David Smith, "Donald Trump's Land Seizures Tweet Sparks Anger in South Africa," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2018, sec. US news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/23/trump-orders-close-study-of-south-africa-farmer-killings; Salvador Rizzo, "President Trump's False Claim about Murders on South African Farms," *Washington Post*, August

these politics to international legacies of historical erasure and antiblackness. Looking at Bopape's soil and clay works, paying attention to references to Pan-African politics and African diasporic spiritual practices, I argue that Bopape's approach, emphasizing the respect and agency due to the earth, presents the ground as a living archive which communicates erased histories, knowledges, and forms of relation.

This chapter contributes to the larger dissertation argument by looking at the relationships between representations of land and processes of dispossession and racialization in South Africa in particular, and in Pan-African histories more broadly. As with other colonized sites, in the area now known as South Africa, representations of land and landscape played a key role in the colonial projects of Europeans and in the development of the settler colonial nationalist identity. Seventeenth century maps made by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and other Europeans systematically normalized the displacement of the nomadic indigenous groups that had used the area before Dutch arrival. Cartographers either ignored the Khoikhoi entirely or falsely fixed their presence at the peripheries of European settlements, erasing the history of indigenous land use and their conflicts with the VOC over access to land.[178] Analyzing travelogues and etchings made by English visitors in the early nineteenth century, David Bunn argues that the use of rustic imagery, transposed from the likes of Gainsborough, was used to normalize and romanticize the presence of English

24, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/08/24/president-trumps-false-claim-about-murders-south-african-farms/.

[178] Glatigny, Maré, and Viljoen, "Inter Se Nulli Fines."

settlers at the frontier and consequently the development of colonial mercantilism.[179] He writes: "Settler landscapes function as a sort of transitional symbolic space, enabling the establishment of a noncontradictory colonial presence."[180] Turning to the twentieth century, Jeremy Foster argues that "the preoccupation with finding some kind of psychic accommodation with "the land" became a defining feature of white South African nationhood."[181] Foster examines the work of several white South African artists who "used contemporary European ways of seeing" in their paintings and whose work contributed to building an imagined, naturalized community.[182] For example, of Jacobus Henrik Pierneef he argues: "Pierneef's distinctive but consistent stylistic vocabulary and color palette regularized the many different regional landscapes of South Africa and assimilated them into a single, overarching, representational imagined geography."[183] These successive visual discourses accompanied waves of violence and displacement that laid the groundwork for the race-based place-making of apartheid. Writing in the catalogue for the 2008 exhibition of contemporary art *Home Lands-Land Marks*, Tamar Garb notes: "The scars and the traces of the physical partitions, spatial disruptions, demographic

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[179] David Bunn, "Our Wattled Cot" : Mercantile and Domestic Space in Thomas Pringle's African Landscapes," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 150.
[180] Bunn, 143.
[181] Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 2, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=2045658.
[182] Foster, 198.
[183] Foster, 198; Pierneef's idealized landscapes held such ideological weight in apartheid South Africa that in 1989 the artist Wayne Barker undertook a series of performances in which he copied and then symbolically destroyed the paintings. For a full discussion of this see: John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009), 219–28.

dispersals and resettlements [of apartheid]…still remain. We see them etched in the earth."[184] One powerful example of this is seen in David Goldblatt's photograph *Remnant of a hedge planted in 1660 to keep the indigenous Khoikoi out of first European settlement* (1963). The black and white image shows some of the wild almond and thorn hedges that were planted by Jan van Riebeeck of the Dutch East India Company in 1660 to protect the boundaries of the Dutch settlement and which are now preserved in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Several of Goldblatt's photographs were included in the *Home Lands-Land Marks* exhibition along with pieces by Nicholas Hlobo, William Kentridge, Vivienne Koorland, Santu Mofokeng, Berni Searle, and Guy Tillum. Amongst these artists all thinking about the legacies of apartheid in representations of land, Garb identifies Searle and Hlobo as part of a new generation of South African artists "whose reclaiming of the past involves a renegotiation of the land and a recovery of the silenced voices of the subjugated population."[185] Both these artists move away from the European visual tradition of seeing the land and work in performance and installation respectively. Bopape joins the conversation with the likes of Searle and Hlobo, focusing her attention on the earth as a point of access to the silenced voices and erased histories.

I use the term "Pan-African" when analyzing Bopape's work to describe not only specific political movements that arose in South Africa and across the continent in the twentieth century, but as a broader term that encompasses the goals and ideologies of

[184] Tamar Garb, "A Land of Signs," in *Home Lands--Land Marks: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, ed. Tamar Garb (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008), 9–10.
[185] Garb, 25.

the Pan-African Conferences as manifested throughout history.[186] In this sense I am informed by the work of Hakim Adi who writes that what unites the various strands of Pan-Africanism is "a belief in the unity, common history and common purpose of the people of Africa and African diaspora and the notion that their destinies are interconnected."[187] Bopape's work, through the references to the Haitian Revolution, the Atlantic slave trade, Palestinian land struggles, African migrants in Europe, Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko, and other moments of resistance across the African continent, engages this Pan-African perspective. I also occasionally use Black Atlantic when referring to elements in Bopape's practice that speak particularly to the Atlantic slave trade and the connections between African and African diaspora practices in the Caribbean and North America.

In the decade during which Dineo Seshee Bopape has been showing her work internationally, she has already garnered critical and scholarly attention. One of the recurring themes in scholarship on Bopape's practice is her complex approach to temporality and the archive. In an article addressing the subversive temporality of Early Nollywood video productions, Nomusa Makhubu refers to Bopape's video artwork *is I am sky* (2013) as a piece that "disrupts the time conventions of art and cinema disciplines" and that in its "web of time" interrogates and rejects linear

[186] For information on Pan-African political movements from the international conferences to the formation of the African Union, see Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Hakim Adi, Marika Sherwood, and George Padmore, *The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress Revisited* (London: New Beacon Books, 1995).
[187] Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, 2.

narratives."[188] Similarly considering Bopape's temporal intervention, Zoé Whitley notes that Bopape "conceives of time and space through acts of simultaneity and synchronicity" and argues that her installations bring the future into the present, while also engaging with blackness and racism as spatial phenomena.[189] In a related vein Christopher Williams-Wynn and Samantha McCulloch considered Bopape's digital video and found-object installations within an assessment of the politics of the archive in South Africa.[190] Raél Jero Salley analyzes several of Bopape's early digital and performance works to ask "What sort of time encompasses the existence and experience of black African subjects?"[191] I will draw upon Salley's work in my analysis here.

There are several recent articles that consider Bopape's soil and shrine works within the framework of colonial struggles and Black aesthetic practices. Curator Osei Bonsu's chapter in the catalog for the installation *Lerole: footnotes (The struggle of memory against forgetting)* (2018) begins some of the lines of thought on land and politics pursued here.[192] And, over several articles providing close readings of the

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[188] Nomusa Makhubu, "Art by Any Other Name: Mediated Performance Art and Temporality in Early Nollywood Video-Film," *Critical African Studies* 10, no. 2 (2018): 228–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1357129.
[189] Zoé Whitley, "Today and Yesterday, Forever: Negotiating Time and Space in the Art of Mame-Diarra Niang and Dineo Seshee Bopape.," *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 12, no. 2–3 (2014): 179, https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.12.2-3.175_1.
[190] Christopher Williams-Wynn and Samantha Mcculloch, "Between the Archive and the Real: Contemporary Digital Art and South Africa," *Third Text* 29, no. 6 (2015): 415–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2016.1213959.
[191] Raél Jero Salley, "The Changing Now of Things," *Third Text: The Art of Change in South Africa* 27, no. 3 (2013): 360, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.798182.
[192] Osei Bonsu, "The Object of Memory," in *Para | Fictions*, ed. Natasha Hoare (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2018).

digital video *is I am sky* (2013) and the soil and brick installation *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)* (2017), Portia Malatjie attends to Bopape's aesthetic and philosophical explorations of blackness.[193] Malatjie articulates a relationship between blackness and land:

> In certain areas, land is the nucleus around which blackness comes into being. What I mean by this is, if we are to follow on from the Afro-pessimist belief that blackness is preceded by ontology, and that blackness is that which is borne out of violent encounters such as slavery or colonialism, then land becomes the central point on which the becoming nonhuman (or becoming nothing) of black people reveals itself.[194]

Malatjie states that anti-black racism comes into being through land dispossessions such as slavery and colonialism. This observation is one of the reoccurring themes of this dissertation and I will draw upon Malatjie's analysis of Bopape's work to build my argument in this chapter. Whereas Malatjie focuses on the aesthetics and futurity of blackness in Bopape's practice I examine Bopape's relationship with the geological and ecological, bringing Bopape's work into a conversation with decolonial and Black geopoetics.

As discussed in the introduction, geopoetics refers to creative, literary, or aesthetic engagements with geographic concepts of place, space, and terrain. Decolonial geopoetics resist or rewrite colonial representations and epistemologies of geography, upending hegemonic histories and geopolitics. I use decolonial geopoetics more specifically to think about the practices of artists such as Bopape that work with

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[193] Portia Malatjie, "Nang'umfazomnyama: Race and Technology in Dineo Seshee Bopape's Is i Am Sky," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 48, no. 1 (2019): 4–11, https://doi.org/10.1086/706122; Portia Malatjie, "A Constellation of Voids: Dineo Seshee Bopape and the Shrine to Nothingness," in *The Stronger We Become* (Department of Arts and Culture, South Africa, 2019), 21–24.
[194] Malatjie, "A Constellation of Voids: Dineo Seshee Bopape and the Shrine to Nothingness," 23.

the materials of the ground to reflect upon colonial violence against lifeworlds of the land and human. Another example would be Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu. Also working within the intersection of material, political, and poetic Mutu describes her use of soil:

> Using land, either as subject matter or material, in my work is a way for me to connect and re-draw power from the fertile land of my childhood…[my artworks] all come from places I've seen and touched and remember with a heavy heart and are a record of the history of the land and the struggles of my people.[195]

For Bopape, like Mutu, the soil is a complex material that captures both an emotional and ancestral relationship to place, and that indexes the violence and loss experienced there.

One prong of my argument is that in carrying histories and knowledges, the soil becomes an archive, contributing to a substantial literature on archives in contemporary art. Hal Foster explored what he termed "the archival impulse" in a 2004 article that closely examined the work of artists who sought to "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present."[196] Mark Godfrey built on Foster's work to consider the critical historiography of artistic projects. Godfrey suggests that artists, trained to think critically about modes of representation and allowed methodological creativity, can "insist on the contingency of knowledge" and critique conventional authoritative narratives.[197] Adding a feminist analysis,

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[195] Wangechi Mutu, "The Power of Earth in My Work," in *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*, ed. Karen Milbourne (Washington, D.C: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2013), 95.
[196] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* (October 1, 2004): 4, https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847.
[197] Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian*," *October* 120 (April 1, 2007): 167, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2007.120.1.140.

Giovanna Zapperi looks at artists surfacing repressed histories from the archive using their subjective desires to mediate the relationship between past, present and future.[198] Though useful, these articles refer to artists' use of documentary materials such as text and photography. Bopape's practice is archival in the way that she uses soil from particular sites to carry a trace of place and history, in her mobilization of performative, embodied forms of meaning-making via the soil, and through her engagement with suppressed knowledges. I thus find more applicable articles like that of Dulcie Abrahams Altass on El Hadji Sy and Issa Samb's performative methods in which she posits the embodied performance as its own mode of archiving.[199] Bopape's work, like Issa Samb's, resists easy commodification of the object.

Osei Bonsu notes that Bopape's installations exist in a "past tense" and the viewer seems to arrive just too late to participate in her devotional practice.[200] This notion of a lag or lateness is echoed by Salley in his analysis of earlier works: "Once more, the viewer is left with the sense that a story has just begun, is about to begin, or has just been missed."[201] Both authors point to a sense that the viewer is stepping into an action that is ongoing, but also out of sight, forcing an awareness of the viewer's limited perspective on history, even as Bopape attempts to show some of what has been erased. I start by delving into this tension between presence and absence in

[198] Giovanna Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art—Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review*, no. 105 (2013): 21–47.
[199] Dulcie Abrahams Altass, "Rethinking Performance as Archive Through The Practice of El Hadji Sy and Issa Samb," *SUNU JOURNAL*, May 2020, https://www.sunujournal.com/essays/rethinking-performance-as-archive-through-the-practice-of-elnbsphadjinbspsynbspandnbspissanbspsamb-wrjds.
[200] Bonsu, "The Object of Memory," 59.
[201] Salley, "The Changing Now of Things," 259.

Bopape's work, to better understand the stakes of Bopape's soil works and the different forms of erasure and loss that her work exposes.

A Re-emphasis of Presence

Figure 16 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Kgoro, we can't afford not to mourn (tell me, can you dispossess a void?)*, 2019, Mixed media installation, Soil, lights, acrylic paint, water, tobacco leaves, wool, cotton, yarn, beads, ceramic, feathers, blue, Variable dimensions, Installation view San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg. Photo Ian Reeves.

Bopape's oeuvre raises questions about how materials are understood and studied in art historical and visual studies discourse. This is particularly clear with *Kgoro, we can't afford not to mourn (tell me, can you dispossess a void?)* (2019) installed at SFMOMA (figure 16). Kgoro means gateway in Pedi. Outwardly the work is a dense

brown cube, protruding from one wall and reaching almost all the way to the ceiling—it appears to be an obstruction rather than a portal.

Figure 17 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Kgoro, we can't afford not to mourn (tell me, can you dispossess a void?*), 2019, Soil, lights, acrylic paint, water, tobacco leaves, wool, cotton, yarn, beads, ceramic, feathers, blue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo by Alexandra Moore.

The work's presence filled the gallery, and several stools (and upturned crates to be used as stools) were placed around the cube, inviting the viewer to sit in its shadow. The walls of the object were sandy and a light brown. By making a cube, Bopape knowingly gestures to both the minimalist and monumental earthworks traditions and enters a well-established practice of artists using the cube to succinctly critique modern art discourse. The work rivals Richard Serra's giant steel *Berlin*

Block (for Charlie Chaplin) (1978) in scale. It evokes Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961) in which Morris made an audio recording of the hours of labor he spent making the wooden box, though here, rather than the sound of the making, we have a list of materials. According to the museum label, the work is made of soil, lights, acrylic paint, water, tobacco leaves, wool, cotton, yarn, beads, ceramic, feathers, blue sage, cedar, palo santo, and plastic. The materials list brings into the room the plantation economy (via cotton and tobacco), Black Atlantic spiritual practices (via beads, feathers, and sage), and practices indigenous to the Americas (via cedar and palo santo). Though obscured from view, these histories are present, weeping sand onto the usually pristine floor (figure 17).

According to Frances Colpitt, "Minimal works of art are nonreferential. Released from representation, they further remove themselves from allusion by being in themselves new and unique objects, referring to nothing."[202] The minimal forms of Donald Judd or Robert Morris, in Colpitt's view, aspired to refer to nothing in "the belief that the material apprehensible form of the object constituted its reality."[203] In sculptor Carl Andre's words: "I want wood as wood and steel as steel, aluminum as aluminum, a bale of hay as a bale of hay... I wish to submit to the properties of my materials."[204] Anna C. Chave complicates this purely materialist narrative by pointing

[202] Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 102.
[203] Colpitt, 106.
[204] Quoted in Dominic Rahtz, "Carl Andre, Artisan," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 5, no. 2 (2012): 168, https://doi.org/10.2752/174967812X13346796877996. I cannot in good conscience quote Andre without noting that in 1985 he was accused of murdering his wife, Ana Mendieta, whose work is briefly discussed in chapter 3.

to the spiritual or religious language often used by artists, reviewers, and patrons when discussing minimalism.[205] She argues that "Minimalists across the United States may be said to have pursued, in diverse ways, the capacity for authentic experience."[206] However, the aspiration towards material transparency remains one of the defining features of the movement. This approach depends upon a subject/object split in which materials such as steel and plexiglass have no histories to impart, demands that they make upon the present, or consequences for the future. It requires the material to be an abstraction of its own history, an unoccupied terrain. Bopape turns the cube against this non-referential tradition. Materials are not removed from their webs and their histories but rather are haunted by them. In addition, as Chave notes, thanks to wealthy patronage Minimalist artists began working at larger scales at spaces such as Dia Beacon and outside galleries. For example, Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977) sits on a piece of land one mile by one kilometer in the New Mexico desert. The description of the piece on the Dia Foundation website makes no reference to how the land was acquired or the history of inhabitation and conquest in the area.[207] Bopape's cube critiques the attempted erasures enacted materially and spatially by art movements such as Minimalism (and the institutions that participate in these narratives) and instead asks the viewer to engage with the seen and the unseen. The solid yet impenetrable cube is a physical presence—or gateway—to

[205] Anna C. Chave, "Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura, and Place," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 3 (September 2008): 466–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2008.10786403.
[206] Chave, 478.
[207] Dia, "The Lightning Field," Dia Art Foundation, accessed October 23, 2022, https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/walter-de-maria-the-lightning-field.

acknowledging the attempted erasures that settler colonial society relies upon. Seen within the frame of Bopape's work, the nonreferential thesis of minimalism reflects the notion of *terra nullius*—the possibility of a blank, empty land ready for discovery and mastery. The cube of *Kgoro* hammers home that what Mbembe calls "the fantasy of Whiteness" rests upon a litany of violence, removals, and historical amnesia.[208]

Bopape addresses the fallacy of empty African landscapes in several works, including *Lerole: footnotes (The struggle of memory against forgetting)* (2018) (figure 18).[209] In this installation adobe bricks form an archipelago of altars within a Pan-African ocean of sounds. The bricks are treated with careful attention: some are flecked with gold leaf, others lightly dusted in ash or red earth. In addition to offerings of burnt sage and a plethora of clenched clay forms, the altars are populated by seventy-one wooden plaques commemorating different organized anti-colonial rebellions that have taken place on the continent, stretching from 1415 to 1935. They include the 1665 battle of the Kongo Kingdom against the Portuguese and the 1897 refusal of the Kingdom of Benin to submit to English trade monopoly. Many are names of people, places, and events that are likely unfamiliar to the European audiences in Hamburg or Vienna where the work has shown so far, such is the collective amnesia around colonialism for European societies.[210]

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[208] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 43.
[209] Though the work first originated in Vienna, my descriptions are of the 2019 installation in Hamburg which contained the same elements but arranged into different "islands."
[210] This imperial amnesia is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Figure 18 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Lerole: footnotes (The struggle of memory against forgetting),* 2017, Mixed media installation, 100 wooden plaques, 2000 clay clumps molded by clenched fists, bricks, vinyl players and recordings of significant bodies of water on and around the African continent, used construction bricks, adobe bricks, sand bricks, loose sand, red and black oxide powder, rocks, stones, Variable dimensions, Installation view Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

Figure 19 (left) and figure 20 (right) Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Lerole: footnotes (The struggle of memory against forgetting),* 2017, Mixed media installation, 100 wooden plaques, 2000 clay clumps molded by clenched fists, bricks, vinyl players and recordings of significant bodies of water on and around the African continent, used construction bricks, adobe bricks, sand bricks, loose sand, red and black oxide powder, rocks, stones, Variable dimensions, Installation view Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg Detail. Photos by Alexandra Moore.

The clenched fist shapes that populate the adobe brick altars signify both revolution and presence (figures 19 & 20). According to curator Osei Bonsu, their form references the Pan-Africanist leader Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe (discussed in more detail in the next section) who was imprisoned at Robben Island. While there he could not speak with new arrivals to the prison so instead, he would lift his hand and let dirt run through it, a gesture symbolizing solidarity and reiterating kinship with the land.[211] The forms also evoke the gesture of a fist raised in solidarity and bring to

[211] Bonsu, "The Object of Memory," 62.

mind images by Black artists from the Pan-Africanist era such as Elizabeth Catlett's *Black Unity* (1968) or Barbara Jones-Hogu's *Unite* (1971) or more recent pieces such as Richard Rawlins' *True Crown* (2018). Bopape has referred to the clenched clumps as "rocks with the potential of being thrown for revolt or to build something," and as a record of "a hand caressing" the clay, offering a physical trace of an act of love for the earth.[212] In their tactile recording of a vulnerable individual body, the forms echo Gabriel Orozco's *My Hands are My Heart* (1991), in which the artist clenched his fists around a piece of clay the size of a human heart. Here however, the forms were made by African immigrants in Vienna, documenting a collective presence.

The way the fists are clustered in piles across the landscape of the installation echoes the practice of isivivane.[213] Describing an isivivane, David Chichester writes: "In many indigenous southern African traditions, such a pile of stones was used in rituals of transition, when a person might add a stone if embarking on a journey or returning home."[214] Similar to a cairn, the isivivane is a documentation of presence and belonging at a particular place and within a collective action. They can also serve a memorial function and have been woven into post-apartheid meaning making: at the Freedom Park heritage site in Pretoria an isivivane of stones from across South Africa is intended to symbolize national unity, and in

[212] Dineo Seshee Bopape, "Artist Talk" (Concordia University, March 8, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa_twaMKdxc.
[213] Thank you to Nomusa Makhubu for suggesting this line of thinking.
[214] David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, *Wild Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 104, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520951570.

1995 Nelson Mandela started a cairn at the Robben Island limestone quarry where he and fellow prisoners labored. The Robben Island isivivane is the focus of Alfredo Jaar's series of photos and neon sculptures, *Men Who Cannot Cry* (2018), which, like much of his work, consider forms of remembering brutal events. Like these examples, Bopape's carefully choreographed piles of clenched clay forms are acts of memorial to those killed in each rebellion and act as the traces of people coming to bear witness to her retelling of history.[215] But where the Freedom Park and Robben Island isivivane both allude to the recent past while making a hopeful commitment to the nation's future, Bopape's demand an unflinching look at the longer context of apartheid.

Bopape's historiography prioritizes a reckoning with the violence, loss, and struggle of the last 400 years, recording the harassment and incursion that occurred at different places along the continent's coast. This is an immersive Afrocentric history, breaking apart Eurocentric and teleological narratives. Through centering African resistance, Bopape knits together a historical narrative in which what also becomes visible is "a certain mode of Western presence in the world, a certain figure of brutality and cruelty, a singular form of predation with an unequaled capacity for subjection and exploitation."[216] In making a Pan-African archive Bopape holds up a mirror to a long history of European violence.

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[215] The selection and arrangement of the clay forms varies at each plaque and are done with precision and care. For example, the three clay shapes by a plaque recording an 1893 German attack on Nama communities are fired and glazed in a deep green, referencing the color of malachite found in Namibia. See figure 20 for a visual reference and chapter 1 for more details on this history.
[216] Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 45.

Also speaking to the fallacy of empty African landscapes is *In relative opacity: 'every generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it, in relative opacity': part one* (2015) (referred to as *In relative opacity* moving forward) which takes its title from a line in Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Across the screen, in bold, block letters, pass the names of several songs of struggle that were sung during apartheid and again by students in the Rhodes Must Fall movement. These songs include *Azania*, *My Father was a Garden Boy*, and *Shona Malanga*. Bopape states: "If you know the songs then the video is not silent because then you hear the music…you are able to hear the songs that have been sung for generations and generations."[217] For those in the know—those involved with anti-apartheid or more recent Fees Must Fall movements—not only does the video conjure the sonic memories and emotional power of these melodies, but it also carries the content and the histories of these songs as well as memories of when and where they have been sung to gather people in solidarity and garner courage. Portia Malatjie refers to such songs as "technology of black struggle" because of this power to produce and mobilize a collectivity.[218] As the song titles move across the screen from right to left, the background shifts kaleidoscopically, refracting video footage taken at The Cradle of Humankind World Heritage site with the eyes of Robert Sobukwe, the Pan-Africanist leader, and Steve Biko, a fellow anti-apartheid activist and leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. In snippets, the video sweeps over majestic tree-

[217] Bopape, "Artist Talk."
[218] Malatjie, "Nang'umfazomnyama," 8.

covered mountains. Tantalizing greens, blues, and yellows emerge from behind the letters, but easy visual consumption of these landscapes is continually disrupted by the refraction and distortion of the images into progressively smaller circles, and the layering of the eyes and song titles over the background. Where Dutch cartographers or British landscape painters represented the terrains of South Africa as uninhabited or unclaimed, Bopape images the terrain as inseparable from human inhabitants and their resistance within that landscape.[219] "These eyes and these songs, the music, are a re-emphasis of that presence."[220]

Figure 21 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Is I am Sky*, 2014, Video, color, sound, 17:48 min. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

[219] This video also has a conceptual and formal relationship to Berni Searle's *Alibama*, 2008 which would be interesting to explore in further depth in the future.
[220] Bopape, "Artist Talk."

In the video *is I am sky* (2013) Bopape also mixes songs of power and struggle with an aesthetic of dissolving landscapes and disembodied eyes (figure 21). Here, the eyes are Bopape's, who filmed herself singing 'Hamba Khale Mkhonto,' a piece sung at Nelson Mandela's funeral, while she was walking outdoors. The image focuses on her face and the sky. Bopape's face begins to dissolve into the blue daylight, leaving fragments of her eyes, mouth, and hair on the screen. As it continues, her barely present profile fills with abstracted pink and yellows that are reminiscent of flowers, and then morphs into images of the cosmos, with Bopape's eyes and profile shifting but omnipresent. Bopape said of *is I am sky* that she "was trying to find a way of marrying the sky."[221] But, Bopape also states: "I sang some songs with the camera low, kissing the sky, thinking about what it is to be landless and have nothing."[222] Here Bopape connects the idea of loving the sky to her own sense of dispossession and a longing for land. Bopape made this piece during the trial of African National Congress Youth League President Julius Malema for singing the struggle song *Aye saba amagwala*.[223] The court ultimately ruled that Malema could not sing the apartheid-era song which contains words that literally translate to "shoot the Boer."[224] In response, anti-apartheid poets, scholars, and activists have argued that

[221] Malatjie, "Nang'umfazomnyama," 7.
[222] Yvette Gresle and Dineo Seshee Bopape, "The Film Will Always Be You: South African Artists On Screen," *Writing in Relation* (blog), July 28, 2015, https://writinginrelation.wordpress.com/2015/07/28/the-film-will-always-be-you-south-african-artists-on-screen/.
[223] Bilal Randeree, "S Africa Tense over 'struggle' Song," *Al Jazeera*, April 6, 2010, https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2010/04/20104413736419274.html.
[224] David Smith, "Julius Malema Banned from Singing South African Apartheid-Era Song," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2010, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/02/julius-malema-south-africa-banned-song.

it should be understood within its historical and political context as calling for an end to white supremacy and minority white rule.[225] In her article on *is I am sky*, Portia Malatje states: "The situation [of Malema's trial] clearly echoed apartheid policing of black expression, experience, and memory."[226] In addition to drawing her impetus from the trial of Malema, Bopape describes her visual foray into the celestial cosmos as a reference to Sun Ra: "In his work Sun Ra thinks about what it means to be black in a white world. What does it mean to exist as a negation in language? He puts forward the idea that black people should cease to exist as a white imaginary."[227] In response, she transmogrifies the racist fantasy of Black disappearance into a vision of herself as eternal and cosmic, embedded in the terrain and intrinsic to the universe.

Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar

Just as Bopape drew attention to the histories embedded within materials in *Kgoro, we can't afford not to mourn (tell me, can you dispossess a void?)* (2019) in this next section, I contend that Bopape's use of soil and clay is similarly intentional and weighted. Through analysis of *The name of which escapes me now (in its whole as well as in numerous specific places...)* (2016), and *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)* (2017) I argue that her use of soil is firmly rooted in Pan-African and Black Liberation politics, surveying her references and situating her practice within the history of soil-based monuments. Further, I argue that, as with her use of

[225] Liz Gunner, "Song, Identity and the State: Julius Malema's 'Dubul' Ibhunu' Song as Catalyst," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2015): 326–41.
[226] Malatjie, "Nang'umfazomnyama," 8.
[227] Gresle and Bopape, "The Film Will Always Be You."

the struggle songs above, these works can be read as bringing to light repressed histories of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Figure 22 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *The name of which escapes me now (in its whole as well as in numerous specific places...)*, Mixed media installation, 7 metal structures, light boxes, stickers, pliers, earth, spoons (various sizes), stones (various sizes), crystals, plastic bowl, spices, bricks, loose soils, plastic and glass bottles, sea water, paraffin, healing herbs, cowrie shells, thread, Variable dimensions, Installation view Palais El Bahia, Marrakech Biennale, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

One of Bopape's first pieces using soil was *The name of which escapes me now (in its whole as well as in numerous specific places...)* (2016), also referred to in several artist talks by Bopape as *Azania*.[228] The eight-part installation, spread over

[228] Bopape, "Artist Talk"; Dineo Seshee Bopape, "Contemporary Arts Society Artist Talk" (Royal College of Art, UK, March 27, 2018), https://vimeo.com/261999025.

several rooms of a palace in the Marrakech Biennial, used soil throughout the different sculptural elements, but the analysis here focuses on a small shrine of approximately thirty adobe bricks that Bopape intended as a memorial to the Haitian revolution (figure 22). Adobe bricks are made from a mixture of clay, sand, horse manure, and straw, packed into a square mold and dried in the sun. This is a 4000-year-old vernacular building technique common all over the world but often abandoned in the name of development or modernity.[229] Bricks, both hand hewn and manufactured, frequently appear as key formal elements in South African art. For example, in photographs from the 1980s by David Goldblatt, in Kendall Geers' installation *Brick* (1988), and in Donna Kukuma's performance *If the past were to be postponed into the future, would this moment be a memory?* (2013). Commenting on this history, Sean O'Toole, notes:

> Far from being just a building material, bricks are now understood to be materially resonant signifiers of place, markers of an authentic post-war Johannesburg vernacular architecture style, tools of violence and, come 1990, readymade cultural artefacts worthy of display in a gallery."[230]

Bopape's use of bricks in her installations holds these various connotations. Earth in rust, brown, pale green and even a tawny yellow has been poured around and over the bricks. Towards the top, a celestite geode lies next to a ball of soft loosely molded

[229] Adobe brick and other local techniques were rejected as primitive and replaced by concrete, fired brick and other "modern" materials in many areas. With the current climate crisis, the benefit of traditional materials is being re-examined. See for example Ejiga, Opaluwa, Obi Paul, and Osasona O Cordelia. "Sustainability in Traditional African Architecture: A Springboard for Sustainable Urban Cities," 9. Kampala, Uganda, 2012.

[230] Sean O'Toole, "A Model Brick: A Literary History of the Brick in Johannesburg," *Art Africa*, April 16, 2018, https://www.artafricamagazine.org/a-model-brick-a-literary-history-of-the-brick-in-johannesburg-sean-otoole/.

clay. A wooden ladle protrudes from a crack between two bricks, its head delicately painted with gold leaf and filled with dark brown dirt. The geode and the wooden spoon are common tourist purchases from Madagascar and Morocco, serving as additional metonyms for each place.

A single cowrie shell sits at the very top of the altar in a bed of red sand, above a sprinkling of purple petals and several bunches of sage leaves. Cowrie shells, harvested by the thousands in the Maldives, auctioned by the ton in Europe, and used as ballast and currency for the middle passage, have a complex set of resonances as both an object of adornment and power, and a residue of the global trade in enslaved Africans.[231] The altar holds reused plastic water bottles of various sizes with either black or white cloth caps. The bottles cluster on either side of the bricks. Some hold petrol, summoning the potential for explosive power. Others hold seawater, intended for healing wounds. The seawater, like the cowrie, also invites remembrance of the Atlantic journey taken by the enslaved Haitians.

For the soils throughout the installation, Bopape drew earth from the four corners of the African continent, referencing the lyrics of *Azania* which calls for freedom "from Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar."[232] Recordings of people whistling the song also played in the space.[233] These same words are present in a speech by the political leader Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe to the Pan Africanist

[231] James Walvin, "Cowrie Shells, Slavery and Global Trade" (Wiley, 2017).
[232] *Dineo Seshee Bopape, the Main Prize Winner of the Future Generation Art Prize 2017*, accessed March 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-FBiLqBBy8&vl=en..
[233] Bopape, "Contemporary Arts Society Artist Talk."

Congress in 1959. Referring to his audience as "Sons and Daughters of the Soil," Sobukwe declared: "We regard it as the sacred duty of every African state to strive ceaselessly and energetically for the creation of a United States of Afrika, stretching from Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar."[234] As Bopape notes, this is a direct rebuttal to Cecil Rhodes' call for a railroad that stretched from Cape to Cairo so as to enable more convenient access to Africa's mineral wealth.[235] Sobukwe's words respond to Rhodes' language of domination and flattening of the vast African continent, with a call for solidarity and collective strength. As mentioned, in several artist talks Bopape referred to the piece as "Azania," and in a blog post from 2016, Bopape writes that she considered changing the name of the work to "Azania-Izwe Lethu."[236] This suggests that the ideological underpinnings of Azania—the title of the liberation song and an Arabic derived term for Southern Africa that predates European incursion— and Izwe lethu—a Xhosa derived, Pan-Africanist cry meaning "our land"—are central to the work.

[234] Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, "1959 Pan Africanist Congress Inaugural Speech," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 9 (October 2017): 165.
[235] Bopape, "Artist Talk."
[236] Dineo Seshee Bopape, "Azania," *Dineo Seshee Bopape* (blog), March 16, 2016, http://seshee.blogspot.com/2016/03/azania.html."

Figure 23 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)*, 2017, Mixed media installation, Mud/dung bricks, 3 types of locally sourced clay - black, red, white, sea water, red soil, grey soil, yellow soil, black soil, soil from Morocco, Madagascar, Cairo, Cape Town, herbs - bushes of sage as well as healing herbs, cowrie shells, crystals, one Moroccan wooden ladle, 18 carat gold leaf, blue string, red fabric, gasoline, glass jars, plastic bottles, charcoal, plastic buckets, wooden poles, Variable dimensions, Installation view Sharjah Biennial 13, 2017, Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

A year later Bopape expanded the small monument into *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)* (2017) at the Sharjah Biennial (figure 23). The piece consists of a collection of stacked brick formations in a bright, sandy courtyard. There are red plastic buckets filled with sand, and again plastic bottles filled with water and petrol, offerings of burnt sage and other herbs. Here, the central mound of bricks is dotted with flashes of red cloth, including a piece tied around a pole and jutting

towards the sky as a potential flag or torch. I read this red flashing throughout the installation as echoing the red worn by the republicans of the French Revolution starting two years before: seen in handkerchiefs, ribbons, and the Phrygian cap, red was a key visual signifier of the Jacobin call for liberty. Highlighted here, it emphasizes the connection between the calls for liberty, equality, and fraternity, expressed in Paris and those which followed in San Domingo.

Several blown glass ovals in black and amber hold the artist's breath. In building this larger monument to the Haitian revolution's moment of Pan-African solidarity, Bopape once again brought together soils from Morocco, Madagascar, Egypt, and South Africa, along with soils from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Palestine. Unlike other installations of Bopape's, many of the bricks in this piece have a blackened patina, again suggesting the explosiveness of the moment—a sentiment also literalized in the plastic bottles of petrol. The sound of the ocean emanates from speakers buried under the ground, again referencing the history of the middle passage, and emphasizing the ocean as a connection between the African continent and Haiti.

Figure 24 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)*, 2017, Mixed media installation, Mud/dung bricks, 3 types of locally sourced clay - black, red, white, sea water, red soil, grey soil, yellow soil, black soil, soil from Morocco, Madagascar, Cairo, Cape Town, herbs - bushes of sage as well as healing herbs, cowrie shells, crystals, one Moroccan wooden ladle, 18 carat gold leaf, blue string, red fabric, gasoline, glass jars, plastic bottles, charcoal, plastic buckets, wooden poles, Variable dimensions, Installation view Sharjah Biennial 13, 2017, Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation, Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

On the sandy floor of the courtyard beside the large brick altars, the artist laid out three circles of clenched clay forms painted white (figure 24). A statement by Bopape notes that these are a reference to aesthetics of the African Initiated Church, Shembe:

> I keep thinking a lot about the shembe people's aesthetics... the white painted rocks used in both urban and rural areas... but most especially in the urban areas, to temporarily demarcate a space that would function as a spiritual zone... a temporary church... an ephemeral space, bubble... arena – within which that spiritual event/activity is to take place...[237]

[237] Gabi Ngcobo, "The Personal Effects of Dineo Bopape and Other References," in *Dineo Seshee Bopape: The Eclipse Will Not Be Visible to the Naked Eye*, ed. Sophie Perryer, Catalogue 53 (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson Gallery, 2010), 35.

According to Bopape, within the context of Shembe, painting the clay forms white is a simple gesture capable of transforming the ground into a spiritual zone. This suggests a sacredness that can be carried, moved, and summoned. Such spirituality is a form of power, particularly for a group of people without the land or resources to establish a permanent structure. Bopape is interested in the role of ritual and spirituality in providing mental health and the strength to rise up, citing both Haiti and the Chimurenga as inspirations.[238]

These two installations sit within a long history of bringing together earth as a way of showing unity or of consecrating and remembering a significant site of loss or violence.[239] However, as art historian Monika Wagner points out, often these memorials are composites in which the purity and separability of the different original elements, whether stone or soil, is retained.[240] Rather than over emphasize the purity and specificity of each separate soil, Bopape's monuments allow the soils to

[238] Bopape, "Artist Talk."
[239] Examples of the former include Emperor Rudolph II's tabletop with rare stones from across the Holy Roman Empire and the 1899 Kaiser Wilhelm monument in Nordenay with stones from different regions of Germany and examples of the latter include Equal Justice Initiative's Community Remembrance project which has gathered soil from hundreds of lynching sites across the U.S. and the US Holocaust Memorial which holds soil from 38 European holocaust sites.
[240] Wagner makes this observation in her analysis of Hans Haake's *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* (2000). In interviews and reviews, critics have compared Bopape's soil works with Walter de Maria's *New York Earth Room* but Haake's *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* is possibly a more fitting comparison. In this piece, Haacke asked members of the Bundestag to each bring soil from their home region and pour them into a single flower bed outside the Reichstag, creating a pan-Germanic soil mixture. Wagner argues persuasively that the discomfort expressed by some Bundestag delegates with this project, though framed as a discomfort with the similarity to National Socialist soil veneration, was a discomfort with Haake's " uncontrolled mixture."[240] Monika Wagner, "Hans Haacke's Earth Samplings for the Bundestag: Materials as Signs of Political Unity," *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 2 (2007): 124, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183507078120.

intermingle. Though Bopape draws attention to the rich color variations of soil and clay, a viewer has no indication of which soils come from where as they spill and flow into each other. This then is a metaphoric uniting of different places. It is a counter proposition to policies of division such as the those enacted at the 1884 Berlin Conference which carved artificial borders that divided African communities, or the ideology of the Bantustans (also known as "homelands") in South Africa which aimed to fix racial and ethnic difference to geographic boundaries.[241] By including earth from Palestine in the second monument, it also gestures to the experiences of land dispossession and racialized apartheid experienced by both Black South Africans and Palestinians. Bopape's monuments use soil to focus attention on shared histories and possibilities of unity. Scholars such as C.L.R. James and Hakim Adi reference the uprising in Saint Domingue (now Haiti), as a starting point of Pan-Africanism: a moment when enslaved people who had been stolen from diverse locations, spoke different languages, and carried with them different cultural traditions, united to demand the rights of liberty and equality. Bopape refers to Haiti as a "a beacon" for other oppressed people.[242] It is to the memory of this moment of hope and possibility, that Bopape dedicated these works.

In addition to speaking broadly of histories of revolution, Bopape's references to Pan-Africanism and Robert Sobukwe have a particular resonance in contemporary

[241] For a discussion of the visual and linguistic construction of difference through place, see Oliver Nyambi and Rodwell Makombe, "Beyond Seeing QwaQwa, 'Homelands,' and 'Black States': Visual Onomastic Constructions of Bantustans in Apartheid South Africa," *African Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2019): 1–20.
[242] Bopape, "Artist Talk."

South African politics. Pan-Africanist ideas and histories have been de-emphasized in South African political mythmaking. South African historian Xolela Mangcu writes:

> Under the leadership of former president Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress, appropriated the language of the Black Consciousness and Pan Africanist movements while disfiguring the role of those movements in the struggle for liberation, with specific and real consequences for how we think about development. [243]

According to Mangcu, in the years since apartheid ended and Nelson Mandela become President of South Africa in 1994, Mandela and his party, the African National Congress (ANC), have been mythologized and celebrated while Robert Sobukwe and others who left to form the Pan-African Congress (PAC) have been relatively sidelined. David Hook argues that today Sobukwe remains a signifier "for a series of repressed critiques of the post-apartheid order." One such possible critique is that land redistribution and other forms of reparations for the damage of colonialism and apartheid are still needed.

Sons & Daughters of the Soil

Having focused on the political references in the works, I now turn to Bopape's engagement of earth honoring practices and references to fertility in works such as *Mabu, Mubu, Mmu,* (2017)*, sa ____ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___)* (2016), and *and- in. the light of this.*__(2017). What different imaginings and practices of relationality between humans and soil do these works invite?

When *Mabu, Mubu, Mmu* was installed at the 2017 Venice Biennale, large slabs of luscious soil filled several rooms of the Palazzo Contarini Polignac, bringing

[243] Xolela Mangcu, "Evidentiary Genocide: Intersections of Race, Power and the Archive," in *Becoming Worthy Ancestors: Archive, Public Deliberations and Identity in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 2.

an earthy warmth to the room's fading luxury (figure 25). The title of this piece refers to three words for soil in Sepedi and invites the viewer to consider the multiple ways of knowing the soil.[244] On the soil's surface sit terracotta and white clay bowls, sprinkled rose petals, gemstones, and various herbs. Looking closer, we can see feathers are pressed into melted candle wax. Several pieces of pale baked clay hold the trace of being clenched into a fist, some of the finger marks carefully glazed a deep blue. Gold leaf decorates small depressions in the soil and in some areas a finger has gently drawn a fish scale pattern into the surface. These magisterial blocks of earth have been multiply blessed, carefully ministered to.

Figure 25 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Mabu, mubu, mmu*, 2017, Mixed media installation, Molded and compressed soil structures created from locally sourced soils, feathers, brass uterus forms, clay pieces molded by a clenched fist, 18 carat gold leaf, loose soil, healing herbs, sound, Variable dimensions, Installation view The Future Generation Art Prize, Palazzo Contarini Polignac, Venice, 2017. Image

[244] Sepedi is a dialect of Northern Sotho, one of the eleven official languages of South Africa.

courtesy the artist and Pinchuk Art Center, Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg. Photo: Sergei Illin

Bopape began incorporating earth-honoring practices into her work after she traveled to Accra, Ghana as part of the 2016 Sao Paulo Biennale Study Days. There, Bopape noticed a small earth shrine that looked similar to shrines in South Africa, sparking her interest in this form of veneration and meaning-making.[245] Shrines in the landscape are common across the continent, acting as a point of communication with the ancestors and a marker of a community's rootedness in a particular place—a literal assertion of Izwe Lethu.[246] Osei Bonsu notes that within these systems of thought and religion it is "believed that by patting and compressing the soil with one's hand the living can transmit messages into the earth."[247] Bopape refers back to this when discussing her own process of compressing the soil for the earth installations.[248] According to Dominique Zahan, "earth shrines can be found wherever human beings make the gesture of deference to the ground that feeds them."[249] By using ceramic bowls, red clay, candles, herbs, and gemstones, Bopape's installations bring ongoing devotional practices into the gallery spaces. These include references to the practices of Afro-Diasporic communities such as Santeria and

[245] Contemporary Art Society, *Contemporary Arts Society Artist Talk: Dineo Seshee Bopape, 22 March 2018*, 2018, https://vimeo.com/261999025..
[246] Allan C. Dawson, "Introduction," in *Shrines in Africa: History, Politics, and Society*, ed. Allan C. Dawson, Africa: Missing Voices (Calgary, CA: University of Calgary Press, 2009).
[247] Bonsu, "The Object of Memory," 59.
[248] Bopape, "Contemporary Arts Society Artist Talk."
[249] Dominique Zahan, "Some Reflections on African Spirituality," in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 17.

Vodun through her use of materials such as cowrie shells, black rooster feathers, and candle wax. She also makes markings in the surface of the soil that reference different traditions of altar making and religious belief. Bopape states: "I was looking at Cosmograms made in Afro-diasporic cultures: Kongo, going up to West Africa, Haiti as well. Also the Abrahamic traditions. Some of the symbols cross over: stars, moon, cross, life, death, night, day."[250] Bopape draws patterns composed of crosses, circles, arrows, and diamonds that distinctly resemble Kongo *dikenga* and the variations of it seen across the Black Atlantic (figure 26). Robert Farris Thompson summarizes the significance of Kongo *dikenga:*

> The *dikenga* marks the crossroads, the tomb, the parting of the ways…the vertical axis, the "power line," connects God above with the dead below. The horizontal axis, "the kalunga line," marks the water boundary between the living and the dead.[251]

He goes on to describe how small circles at the end of the cross represent both the sun and the soul in motion, in a process of "cosmic turning."[252] Thus, as Karen Milbourne summarizes: "Each pattern charts profound spiritual, solar, and spatial concepts—for the world of the living meets the realms of the ancestors."[253] Just as *dikenga* traveled across the Atlantic, feathers reappear across altars at the same sites and Thompson argues that they signify a sense of flight and soaring power.[254]

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[250] Bopape, "Contemporary Arts Society Artist Talk."
[251] Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 49.
[252] Thompson, 49.
[253] Milbourne, *Earth Matters*, 16.
[254] Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 106–7.

Figure 26 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Mabu, mubu, mmu*, 2017, Mixed media installation, Molded and compressed soil structures created from locally sourced soils, feathers, brass uterus forms, clay pieces molded by a clenched fist, 18 carat gold leaf, loose soil, healing herbs, sound, Variable dimensions, Installation view The Future Generation Art Prize, The PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Pinchuk Art Center, Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

The repression and delegitimization of earth honoring practices was a central facet in the development of the settler state. Scholar Grace Musila summarizes the historical and ongoing relationship between colonialism and land ownership across Southern Africa:

> In settler colonies, control and ownership of prime land was an important co-ordinate in the construction of white supremacy. This land was alienated from its owners, a process that was discursively mediated by the vacuation of the land as large expanses of empty space without

> owners, in inadvertent or feigned ignorance of local land use and ownership cultures, which gave the impression of 'unoccupied' land.[255]

Musila draws attention to the fact that dismissing local land use and ownership cultures, such as the farming practice of the Khoikhoi and the shrine-making practices discussed here, was a cornerstone of asserting colonial property rights. The written text was elevated and the "archive potency of artifacts, landscape, orality and performance" were contained and suppressed. [256] European settlers' ownership of the land was prefaced on the extinction of these pre-existing histories and knowledge structures and the continuation of colonial settler society requires the materiality of the earth to remain silent.

These suppressed practices speak to a world view that sees the soil not as a resource to be maximized, but as a partner in continuing life. The dominant European and capitalist conception of land is based on property and domination, but this was not the way that many African communities viewed land before colonization. Speaking of belief systems from across the continent, Achille Mbembe notes that:

> In those cosmogonies people are unthinkable without what we call nature. So while the Anthropocene's turn seems to be a novelty in parts of our world today, we have always lived in that. It is not new. Because you cannot think of people, without thinking of nonhumans.[257]

In the context of South Africa, Leslie Green notes: "Modes of presence-to-landscapes articulated by Khoe and !Xam archives and Namaqualand healers, among others,

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[255] Grace A. Musila, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2015), 151.
[256] Carolyn Hamilton, "Why Archive Matters: Archive, Public Deliberation and Citizenship," in *Becoming Worthy Ancestors: Archive, Public Deliberations and Identity in South Africa*, ed. Xolela Mangcu (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 126.
[257] Achille Mbembe, "The Idea of a Borderless World," *Africa Is a Country*, 11 2018, https://africasacountry.com/2018/11/the-idea-of-a-borderless-world.

offer forms of relation that are not predicated on subject and object."[258] Instead these relationships often foreground relationality, and as Green suggests, "A knowledge based on relationships cannot elide one's own relationships, responsibilities, and reciprocities, which accrues to living in a world."[259]

Soil, Bopape's key medium for these works, is the ideal vehicle for exploring reciprocities and agency of the nonhuman world. After all, soil is alive. In the words of feminist science and technology studies scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, summarizing recent shifts in soil studies: "Organisms *are* soil. A lively soil can only exist with and through a multispecies community of biota that *makes* it."[260] Soil unmoors solid distinctions between living and non-living. Speaking of her solo show at the Pinchuk Center in Ukraine, Bopape makes it clear that she considers the soils she works with sentient agents, stating that she intended the piece "For the materials themselves: how the soil from different regions can communicate with the soil from here. For the materials themselves and what they can experience of each other."[261] At her installation of *sa ____ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___)* (2017) in New York, Bopape played various love songs to the soil while the earth was compacted into the molds and ended her serenade with the sound of drumming and the Congo river (figure

[258] Lesley Green, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 21.
[259] Green, 42.
[260] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "Making Time for Soil: Technoscientific Futurity and the Pace of Care," *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (October 1, 2015): 701, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715599851.
[261] *Dineo Seshee Bopape, the Main Prize Winner of the Future Generation Art Prize 2017.*

27).[262] The soil itself did not originate from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but these sonic gestures towards the soil, suggest a form of welcoming into the gallery and into Bopape's practice, as well as a way of interpolating the New York soil into a network of colonized lands.

Figure 27 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *sa ____ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___)*, 2017, Compressed soil, brass uterus forms, molded soil, charcoal, molded clay pieces, leaves, charcoal, Variable dimensions, Installation view Art in General, New York, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

A repetitious, meditative engagement is necessary for the creation of many of Bopape's works: the pressing of a fist into clay, the hand making of bricks, the productions of five petaled clay flower shapes. Pieces such as *Mabu, Mubu, Mmu* and

[262] Bopape, "Artist Talk."

and- in. the light of this.__, (2017) invite the viewer to share Bopape's capacity for veneration and observation, rewarding sustained attention and close looking. Bopape's arrangement of objects is loving and precise, building intimacy between the artist, objects, and the soil. The artist comments that, "The calling of soil "dirt" by North Americans is a physical pain."[263] In Sepedi, the meanings of dirt and soil are not intertwined as they are in English, where these words betray a disrespect for and distrust of the soil. The mental grouping of the earth and the unclean contributes to the perceived split between human and nature.

Bopape's desire to listen to the soil resonates with Belinda Daneen Wallace's conceptualization of Pan-African feminist humanism. In her study of poetry by Una Marson and Dionne Brand, Wallace teases out a Pan-African feminist humanism that articulates ways of being beyond Western patriarchal epistemologies. In her reading of Marson's poem *The Nameless Flowers*, Wallace analyzes the narrator's refusal to name the flowers:

> The narrator rejects this opportunity because such a domination is completely antithetical to the very idea of subjectivity and counterproductive to the enacting of Pan-African feminist humanism…Rather than remove the nameless flowers from their specificity through the act of naming, the unnamed flowers are rooted more strongly by the narrator's willingness to engage and understand them on their own terms.[264]

Bopape's care, respect, and love shown to sky and soil in her works, reflects this same ethos in which she rejects the domination of nonhuman beings and instead

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[263] Dineo Seshee Bopape and Uhuru Phalafala, "Interview with Dineo Seshee Bopape," in *Soft Power: A Conversation for the Future*, ed. Eungie Joo (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2020), 73.
[264] Belinda Deneen Wallace, "Accessing Pan-African Feminist Humanism: Unlocking the Metacolonial in the Poetry of Una Marson and Dionne Brand," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 4, no. 2 (September 14, 2016): 234.

attempts to enter a relationship of care. Bopape's work evinces a similar avoidance of defining or categorizing any elements of her installation in too fixed a form by not labeling any of the separate elements in her installations. She retains opacity not only for herself, but for the elements with which she works.

As I suggested in my reading of *is I am sky*, Bopape's practice suggests possibilities of being human, not based on the mastery and oppression of other life forms. Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that in the world view that moves from Kant to Newton and defined human difference through the primary lenses of race and gender, "separability is the privileged ontological principle."[265] But, she asks, "Why not assume that beyond their physical (bodily and geographic) conditions of existence, in their fundamental constitution, at the subatomic level, humans exist entangled with everything else (animate and in-animate) in the universe."[266] Emphasizing entanglement rather than separability draws attention towards our codependence and the fundamental rights of life of all things, and away from a focus on difference. The attention and care that Bopape shows the soil suggests a kinship—not unlike that poetically evoked by Sobukwe—and an entanglement.

Kinship and entanglement are particularly foregrounded in Bopape's exploration of fertility, self-sovereignty, and healing that develops across several installations. In pieces including *The name of which escapes me now (in its whole as well as in numerous specific places...)* (2016)*, and- in. the light of this.__*, and her

[265] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," 64.
[266] Ferreira da Silva, 64.

solo show at the Pinchuk Center, Bopape built earthen domes. Formally impressive, the domed spaces intentionally echo several African dwelling spaces such as the Mousgoum Tòlék or a Bamiléké palace.[267] Bopape refers to these structures as wombs or vaginal openings, and reinforces this meaning by scattering the soil with herbs used for healing the female reproductive system and by embedding into the rich earthy surface cast-brass uterus forms.[268] Bopape uses the brass uteruses and healing herbs in several additional soil works including *sa ____ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___),* where a brass uterus sat nestled within a mound of ochre lamb's wool (figure 28) and *Mabu, Mubu, Mmu* in which three brass uterine forms were laid along a thin strip of dark soil, spaced at regular intervals and exposed to the viewer.

[267] For example, it echoes a Mousgoum tólèk, a form that art historian Steven Nelson argues the Mousgoum of Northern Cameroon use as a form for sustaining cultural knowledge and exploring the relationship between past and present. Steven Nelson, "Writing Architecture: The Mousgoum Tòlék and Cultural Self-Fashioning at the New Fin de Siècle," *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (2001): 38–93, https://doi.org/10.2307/3337877.

[268] Brass casting has been practiced across the African continent for centuries for both utilitarian and decorative purposes. Significant works in brass include several 14th Century Ife heads and the various 16th Century figurative sculptures stolen from Benin City.

Figure 28 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *sa ____ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___)*, 2017, Compressed soil, brass uterus forms, molded soil, charcoal, molded clay pieces, leaves, charcoal, Variable dimensions, Installation view Art in General, New York, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg

The buried womb speaks to the vulnerability and sacredness of the ability to reproduce life. Speaking of the US context, Loretta Ross states: "As an expression of collective social trauma, reproductive oppression is experienced by women of color as the exploitation of our bodies, sexuality, labor, and fertility in order to achieve social and economic control of our communities and in violation of our human rights."[269] The control of fertility has been a site of violence against marginalized and

[269] Loretta Ross, "Trust Black Women: Reproductive Justice & Eugenics," in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundation, Theory, Practice, Critique*, ed. Loretta Ross (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2017), 62.

oppressed communities across both sides of the Atlantic. In the US and the Caribbean, enslaved women endured rape, sexual violence, separation from their children, and extraction of their caring capacities; their bodies were sites of political and legal struggle between different factions of white power structures, and they suffered medical torture and abuse.[270] Reproductive oppression is also an integral part of the history and legacy of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid in South Africa. For example, in Yvette Abrahams work on the enslavement of the Khoisan during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, she argues that European travel writers and explorers began obsessively writing about Khoisan women's genitals and buttocks at the time of rising Khoisan resistance, linking the "genital encounter" to a discourse of dehumanization that justified Dutch and then British colonial violence and land capture.[271] And in addition to the explicit racial violence of the apartheid regime, Carol Kaufman argues that the 1974 South Africa Family Planning Program, though not explicitly racial, was an attempt to repress the growth of Black communities under apartheid. The sexual violence of apartheid continues; as of 2009, in South Africa one in three women will be raped in her lifetime, a continuation of apartheid's

[270] Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (March 14, 2016): 166–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596; Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica*, Early American Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2017), https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812294057; Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[271] Yvette Abrahams, "The Great Long National Insult: 'Science', Sexuality and the Khoisan in the 18th and Early 19th Century," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 32 (1997): 43, https://doi.org/10.2307/4066151.

legitimation of violence as a method of maintaining an oppressive hierarchy.[272] The buried wombs and reproductive healing herbs throughout the soil works bring this current state of violent power into conversation with the long history of reproductive oppression and struggle for self-sovereignty experienced by Pan-African women.[273]

The wombs are also tied to a specific and personal trauma: according to Bopape, her grandmother suffered fertility issues after being forced to leave her home during the creation of the Bantustans. Scattering the installation with herbs aimed at healing infertility, Bopape draws attention to the trauma of displacement. She writes:

> in the 'beginning' of my practice i was thinking a lot about baggage, historical, social, personal... the weight of it all became too much but the shape of it i was still interested in... plastic bags/ bubbles, balloons...that balloons are filled with nothing, that they fill a shape and some space... perhaps it is the trace of the baggage that left its imprint on me, the trace of the trauma – turning an invisible yet present thing into nothing, trying to wipe it off, to dismantle it – yet there lies its trace uncontainable in any shape: it is nothing.[274]

This excerpt from Bopape's blog speaks to inherited generational trauma and the struggle in her work to simultaneously make invisible traumas visible while also trying to dismantle them. Thinking across the different works discussed already, the blown glass orbs, the depressions on the soil surfaces, even the clenched fist forms are all forms of tracing the shape of an invisible weight, making a void present. The tension between heaviness and anger vibrates throughout Bopape's works with some leaning more towards making mental strain and anguish present and others tending

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[272] Helen Moffett, "Sexual Violence, Civil Society and the New Constitution," in *Women's Activism in South Africa: Working across Divides*, ed. Hannah Evelyn Britton, Jennifer Natalie Fish, and Sheila Meintjes (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 155–84.
[273] Sexual violence and misogyny are themes that Bopape explores more closely in her film *Title not yet known at time of publication, 2018,* which dramatizes excerpts from the rape trial of former President Jacob Zuma.
[274] Ngcobo, "The Personal Effects of Dineo Bopape and Other References," 32.

towards a site of spiritual replenishment and care. The references to Robert Sobukwe and the Haitian Revolution discussed earlier were both ways of responding to the inherited trauma of colonialism, apartheid, and the Atlantic Slave Trade, and Bopape's deployment of wombs is another.

As with the references to spiritual practices, reproductive healing herbs and the oceanic sounds embedded within or played to the soil also offer a point of connection across the diaspora. In her study of pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing in abolition era Jamaica, Sasha Turner notes that the similarities between the birthing practices of enslaved women and West Africa suggest that "women likely improvised in reproducing West African birth customs in their new homeland."[275] Among the practices that traveled to Jamaican and American plantations were use of herbs, amulets, and river or ocean bathing for pre and perinatal care. These practices, Turner argues, also offered a site of community, intimacy, and autonomy within the constraints of the plantations, asserting the humanity of the enslaved against the inhumane system.[276] The multiple buried wombs thus also reference the collective struggle for life and humanity within inhumane systems. Writing on Ana Mendieta and Wangechi Mutu's engagements with what she calls "the woman-and-nature dialectic" Genevieve Hyacinthe states that "the mutable earth is both nurturer and battlefield" and argues that these artists engage the earth as a place of "the struggle for life" within a Black Atlantic context.[277] The womb-soil relationship established by

[275] Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 118.
[276] Turner, 113.
[277] Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity*, 203, 210.

Bopape's installations similarly highlights these sites as places of the struggle for life and sovereignty within a Black Atlantic context.

Lastly, the various womb forms that Bopape creates and the use of reproductive healing herbs over this soil are also a meditation on the role of the ground as an incubator and source of life. Organic farming pioneer Robert Mazibuko refers to soil and trees as vital to African living systems pre-apartheid: "They were our banks and mines."[278] Mazibuko recalls that "Our ancestors understood that in nature everything is linked up or interconnected."[279] With the formation of the Bantustans, not only were Africans forcibly removed from their homes, but as these newly instituted homelands only constituted seven percent of the area of the Union of South Africa, the land in these areas became crowded and overworked and the farming system that many had practiced for generations gradually collapsed.[280] The fertility of the soil, something that must be carefully cultivated through attention, balance, and respect, was lost. In her study of reproductive control during apartheid, Carol Kaufman links the deterioration of the soil in the homelands to a decline in birthrates, as women lacked the food and resources to nourish themselves and their families.[281] And now:

> South African soils are damaged. They are poisoned by pesticides; leached by fertilisers; torn by ploughs; at risk of drought; under attack from policies preferring apparently "climate-proof" seeds that are genetically modified to be resistant to the trademarked herbicide

[278] Green, *Rock /Ì³ Water /Ì³ Life*, 120.
[279] Green, 121.
[280] Leonard Monteath Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, Third edition., Yale Nota Bene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 164–65.
[281] Carol E. Kaufman, "Reproductive Control in Apartheid South Africa," *Population Studies* 54, no. 1 (2000): 108.

> glyphosate, which means that the only plants that will grow are those under a corporate trademark.[282]

Rather than nurtured and healthy, the soil is merely a location for extracting profit. In records of British travel writers and explorers, the fertility of the soil is repeatedly referenced as a reason for occupying the Cape, but the legacy of that occupation is that the life-giving and life-nurturing properties have been curtailed.[283]

In Bopape's *and- in. the light of this.__*, one uterus is encircled with red rose petals and flecks of gold leaf and accompanied by forms made from warm umber clay clenched into a fist, nuzzled into the dirt. It is a tender moment within the vast scale of the installation, the sort of careful gesture of noticing and intimacy that is manifest throughout Bopape's oeuvre. Portia Malatje writing on Bopape's installations, refers to the homelands as "graveyards where [the dispossessed] are meant to live as black spectres."[284] Employing the image of the graveyard in looking at this artwork, Bopape's tender attention to the cast uterus comes into view as a form of grave or memorial: a place of sorrow and remembrance for the lost and unborn children, the communities who couldn't parent, and sorrow for the death of the soil itself. The womb form and the healing herbs are gestures towards the nurturing of life and emphasize that the same system which violently upholds hierarchies between humans, willingly reducing some humans to bare life, also violates the liveliness of the Earth.

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[282] Green, *Rock /ǂ Water /ǂ Life*, 125.
[283] McAleer, *Representing Africa*, 47.
[284] Malatjie, "A Constellation of Voids: Dineo Seshee Bopape and the Shrine to Nothingness," 23.

Conclusion: What's in Loving a Land?[285]

While researching this chapter, I read several articles by South African feminist scholar and activist Yvette Abrahams. At the beginning of a piece on the pornographic depictions of Khoikhoi people by eighteenth century European travelers and scientists, she wrote: "What I have to write of is painful and soul searing. It would not be right to present it without simultaneously presenting some emotional tools to help you deal with it."[286] This sentiment reflects Bopape's mobilization of the earth. Through installations rooted in mutual care, deep attention, and entangled injustices, Bopape delves into the histories of brutality lodged in the earth but also turns to it as a place of belonging, solidarity, and strength. This earth holds painful and traumatic histories, but it is also the source of spiritual succor, ancestral resistance, and future life.

The right to land in South Africa is an economic claim, but it is also the right to an acknowledgement of trauma and a right to reparations, a right to claim existence, a right to history, and a right to home. The idea of home is clearly present in the work at the beginning of this chapter, *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars), Sketch no22*. Here Bopape used the adobe bricks again, along with other vernacular building practices: walls plastered with mud, a stack of relatively thin sheets of light straw and clay; and grids of white ceramic tiles. Several long-standing artisanal practices were also present in the form of a batik died cloth, twigs and

[285] This section title is taken from the poem *What's In Loving A Land? (To The Young Man Who Asked)* by Ghanaian poet mashood.
[286] Abrahams, "The Great Long National Insult," 35.

chewed gum cast in brass, and a lace edging running around one of the blocks. These are all practices that have survived the onslaught of colonial modernity and conjure the possibilities of building a living space. The work holds this articulation of a future community built upon the foundations of these pasts.

Looking at soil and earth veneration does not need to be a demand for autochthony or return us to false notions of pure belonging and territorial mastery. For example, in Bopape's work the clenched pieces of clay that populate *Lerole: footnotes (The struggle of memory against forgetting)* are the indexical trace of African migrants in Vienna, where the piece was first shown.[287] Bopape hired these individuals to repeatedly imprint themselves into clay from their new home. A new relationship is being formed in this gesture. This is not an iteration of 'blood and soil' nationalism or ethnic purity as seen in 1930s Germany.[288] As I have argued, Bopape's practice urges a unity of purpose amongst African descended people of different nationalities and ethnicities against economic, social, and racial oppression.[289] In the context of Bopape's work, claiming land is a claim to make a life; it is a demand to breathe freely. When Bopape uses soil from Palestine alongside soil from South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, she draws attention to the ongoing disenfranchisement of racialized bodies via limited access to land and the resources and refuge that land provides. And the works open the space for an epistemology

[287] In other installations Bopape made them herself.
[288] Wagner, "Hans Haacke's EArth Samplings for the Bundestag"; Green, *Rock /Ì³ Water /Ì³ Life*, 126.
[289] For more on Pan-Africanism today see Lauren Marx, "The Relevance of Robert Sobukwe's Pan-Africanism in Contemporary South Africa," *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory* 64, no. 153 (December 2017): 128–43, https://doi.org/10.3167/th.2017.6415308.

beyond separability—the all too dominant worldview reliant on the severing of human from human, and human from other forms of liveliness.[290]

Bopape's disappearance into the sky or burying of brass uteruses in the soil invite the viewer to imagine modes of being in relationship with sky and soil that invoke a different possibility for humanness. The works speak to the layers of violent erasure that contributed to settler colonial and white supremacist society in South Africa and beyond. Other possibilities for humanity have always existed beyond what Sylvia Wynter calls the "ethnoclass Man:" a form of being, constructed and reproduced by generations of European bourgeois men and overrepresented in colonial and academic archives. To think of the soil as an archive is to remember that other relationships with the nonhuman are possible, to prioritize the needs of life and liveliness, and to continue to build human knowledge from a stance of humility and entanglement rather than ownership and domination. Rather than alienable property or "dirt" to be managed, Bopape presents the earth as sacred, central, and fundamentally alive.

[290] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability."

3. Jade Montserrat's North Yorkshire Landscapes

In post-war, post-imperial Britain, rural landscapes have generally been seen as white enclaves and disconnected from either the causes or effects of Empire and Britain's central role in the trade in enslaved Africans.[291] This perspective has been supported through popular culture, advertising and tourism campaigns, the National Trust, and political rhetoric. In this chapter, I examine several artworks by UK based artist Jade Montserrat which confront the whitewashing of rural England and explore the stakes of this pastoral amnesia. I focus on three videos, *Clay*, *Peat*, and *Cage*, all made in 2015 in collaboration with Yorkshire-based, British Canadian filmmakers Anj and Caitlin Webb-Ellis (referred to professionally as Webb-Ellis), and a performative wall drawing, *Record Recode*, executed by Montserrat in 2017.[292] I bring these particular works together because they are representations of North Yorkshire landscapes that reference Montserrat's childhood experiences of place and present alternative possibilities for imagining and being in relationship with the land and the ideologies of citizenship and belonging that the land has been used to represent. I argue that Montserrat not only explores and makes visible the violence and alienation she experienced in rural landscapes but establishes her own framework for belonging

[291] For more detail see Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (Peepal Tree Press Ltd., 2021).

[292] Though I will discuss Webb-Ellis's contribution as collaborators in the videos, this chapter primarily focuses on Montserrat. This is because the video works center Montserrat and recall her childhood experiences, and because of the connection I am drawing to her solo works. Though outside the scope of this chapter, these works should also be read within Webb-Ellis' oeuvre.

through building curious, collaborative, and creative relationships with human and nonhuman parts of the ecosystem.

This chapter contributes to the project's broader argument by looking at how race, place, and Englishness have been defined in relationship to one another and within a framework of landscape as property that has contributed to a commodification of the landscape and exclusionary view of English/Britishness. The 2017 hostile environment scandal in which the government defined hundreds of Black Commonwealth-born pensioners as "illegal immigrants" and Britain's protracted exit from the European Union reveal the ongoing stakes and relevance of defining and determining geographies of belonging in the UK. Within this "always already hostile environment," Montserrat works against the multiple vectors of nationalist and racist hostility with the strategies of neighborliness, trust, and responsibility, constructing her own place within the landscape.[293] Stuart Halls' articulation of both "race" and "nation" as discourses informs my study and I spend a significant amount of time in the first part of the chapter exploring how and where these two sliding signifiers intersect with ideas of place in the British imaginary.[294] A historical grasp of this intersection is necessary to understand the significance of Montserrat's interventions in place and landscape.

Though Montserrat has been showing actively in the UK for almost a decade and has been included in surveys such as Phaidon's Vitamin D series and received

[293] I take this phrasing from a conversation with Nicholas Mirzeoff.
[294] Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

high profile commissions including from Transport for London's "Art on the Underground," there is not yet a significant body of scholarship on her practice.[295] She herself is a prolific writer who holds a practice-based PhD from the Institute for Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire, has published several articles, and is frequently invited to speak at conferences across the UK. This chapter draws from Montserrat's various writings and online events as well as several interviews I have conducted with Montserrat over 2019 and 2020. Most aligned with my interests in this chapter, Montserrat wrote a collaborative piece with curator Daniella Ross King that ties together their shared theoretical investments in thinking about "rural" landscapes as Black British subjects, using one of Montserrat's charcoal murals as a launching point.[296] Montserrat also published a brief text on *Clay* and *Peat* in *Reimaging the Mixed Race Experience*, and scholar Sarah Jane Cervenak published a short article on Montserrat's film *Peat*, thinking about the work as a form of wandering.[297] This chapter engages with those texts, but expands significantly upon their scope.

In interviews, lectures and her own writing, Montserrat consistently places her work in relationship with her biography—her life experiences weave into the places she works and the choices she makes. Montserrat was born in London in 1981 and

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[295] Louisa Elderton and Rebecca Morrill, eds., *Vitamin D3: Today's Best in Contemporary Drawing* (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2021).
[296] King and Montserrat, "(Some Possibilities of) Rural Belongings."
[297] Jade Montserrat, "Clay," *Reimagining the Mixed Race Experience*, Shades of Noir, 2017, 54–57; Sarah Jane Cervenak, "With Jade Montserrat's Peat," *ASAP/J* (blog), August 1, 2019, http://asapjournal.com/with-jade-montserrats-peat-sarah-jane-cervenak/.

grew up in Yorkshire. Her mother is white and English, her father a British citizen of the Caribbean, possibly brought to England as a child as a part of the "Windrush generation."[298] Montserrat is not aware of ever meeting her father. She was raised amongst the white relatives of her mother and her stepfather, a lawyer and rural landowner. While her mother was married to her stepfather, Montserrat lived with them in rural Hackness, Yorkshire. She writes in her dissertation of feeling isolated in these circumstances but, as a child, not being able to articulate why. These biographic details shaped her sense of place, both geographically and socially, and are reflected in her choice of surname. In her early adulthood, Montserrat shed the surname of her stepfather and took the name of the island of her biological father's birth.[299] In the words of Stuart Hall, "identity is not a matter of essence but of positioning" and in Montserrat's act of self-creation she locates herself within her Caribbean heritage and proudly declares her belonging within the African diaspora.[300] Her name summons the ongoing reality of the British Empire on the island of Montserrat, even as it has faded from view elsewhere. I read Montserrat's practice in the context of this naming: feet firmly planted in the ground of Northern Britain, but eyes turned towards the colonies and the history of violent enslavement enacted there, finding a way to love her place and build community between these points.

[298] Named for the HMS Windrush which arrived in Southampton from Jamaica in 1947.
[299] Jade Montserrat, "Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project" (Unpublished Draft, Lancaster, UK, University of Central Lancashire, 2020), 56–57.
[300] Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, 130.

Landscape & Place

I use the term landscape in this chapter because this is a term mobilized by the artist and some of the research networks within which Montserrat has participated and to purposefully insert Montserrat's work into the art historical genealogy of landscape representations (particularly drawings and paintings) in the UK. The rise of landscape painting in England in the eighteenth century took place alongside the acceleration of land enclosure in which common lands were privatized and artists such as Thomas Gainsborough made paintings that expressed the economic relationships to the land of the leisured gentry.[301]

Though WJT Mitchell (and others) have made the argument that landscapes are the imperial perspective or the view of those separated from the land, that is not necessarily or always the case.[302] According to Ann Bermingham, John Constable was grappling not just with portraying possession but with his relationship to a place—East Bergholt and the Stour Valley—and the networks of economic and familial power that ensnared him there.[303] Similarly, Ian Waites argues that Peter de Wint's nineteenth century paintings of Lancashire were an elegy to the loss of common rights and common field farming, painted in defiance of the ruling class ideology of the time.[304] In both cases, the images of landscapes were informed by the

[301] Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 1, 31.
[302] W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[303] Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*.
[304] Ian Waites, "'A Spacious Horizon Is an Image of Liberty': Artistic and Literary Representations of Space and Freedom in the English Common Field Landscape in the Face of Parliamentary Enclosure, 1810-1830," *Capital & Class* 28, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 83–102, https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680408400107.

social and economic experiences of the artist within their home milieu. I do not dismiss Mitchell's important observations about the way landscape painting has functioned as a colonial tool but wish to offer additional perspectives. As Alexandra Harris put it: "If we keep talking about landscape painting and perception as necessarily separate from the real life and work of a place, we risk occluding strong ideas of landscape held by those who are deeply familiar with a place in practical as well as contemplative ways."[305]

Montserrat has lived and worked on and with the landscapes brought into focus through the artworks I will discuss. Her intimate knowledge opens up the areas of North Yorkshire that she inhabits with specificity and becomes a point of entry, both for her collaborators and eventually for the viewer. As with the other chapters in the dissertation, I am defining landscape as an interface between place and self, nonhuman and human. By reading Montserrat's works through this lens of landscape, I push to the foreground the fact that these works are representations of a place and a network of relationships that constitute that place, and I offer her work to reimagine and value the land currently known as England in modes that do not feed exclusionary or nationalist narratives.

In a 2018 special issue of British Art Studies dedicated to "landscape now," several of the contributors wrote about the current turn towards interest in landscape imagery—both historical and contemporary—as taking place within the context of a

[305] Alexandra Harris, "Landscape Now," *British Art Studies*, no. 10 (September 2018): 56–84, https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-10/conversation.

similar turn in British literature towards cultural histories that engage with nature and landscape, frequently citing works by Helen McDonald, Robert McFarlane, and Roger Deakins as examples.[306] I also situate Montserrat's work within this undeniable trend in the British publishing industry and find some references to contemporary poetry and journalism useful but her work belongs within discourses that take on a more pointedly political perspective and that interrogate the ongoing association of whiteness and Britishness, particularly rural Britishness—a connection that the writings of McDonald and Deakin do little to complicate. Montserrat's work also operates within what we could call postcolonial landscape scholarship, a move within the last two decades to look critically at the role of representations of landscape in plantation ideologies and in knitting together the metropole and the colonies, rather than focusing on solely national narratives of landscape.[307]

Several artists active in the loosely formulated British Black art movement of the 1980s and 1990s attended to landscape as a mode of critiquing British xenophobia and racism, and of challenging stereotypes that associated the countryside with whiteness.[308] In particular, Ingrid Pollard's *Pastoral Interludes* (1987) (discussed in

[306] Tim Barringer, "Landscape Then and Now," *British Art Studies*, no. 10 (September 2018): 8–20, https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-10/tbarringer; Harris, "Landscape Now."
[307] Barringer, "Landscape Then and Now"; Casid, *Sowing Empire*; Anuradha Gobin, "Constructing a Picturesque Landscape: Picturing Sugar Plantations in the Eighteenth-Century British West Indies," *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* 4, no. 1 (September 12, 2011): 42; Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*.
[308] For more information see David A. Bailey et al., eds., *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press in collaboration with Institute of International Visual Arts and African and Asian Visual Artists' Archive, 2005); Sophie Orlando, *British Black Art: Debates on Western Art History* (New York: Dis Voir, 2016); Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History from 1950 to the Present* (I. B. Tauris, 2014).

more detail in my analysis of *Cage*) and Maud Sulter's series *Syrcus* (1993) are precursors to Montserrat's re-imagining of the pastoral. Montserrat's contemporaries Larry Achiampong, Harold Offeh, and Helen Cammock have also made work which reimagines landscapes and nation and which could be productively placed in conversation with Montserrat's practice. What makes Montserrat's work particularly salient in the context of this dissertation is her longstanding and ongoing investigations of material entanglement and belonging with(in) the landscape.

Place and power are deeply implicated in one another. Geographer Tim Cresswell argues that place is used to transmit and bound ideas of what kinds of action are appropriate and where.[309] He states: "Our consciousness of place all but disappears when it appears to be working well," suggesting that we only really notice place when things are "out of place."[310] Place is both a physical location and a way of thinking about the distinctiveness of said location. Jeff Malpas points out that: "The encounter with the world is never with the world in its entirety, but always and only with the world as it is present here, in this place."[311] In keeping with this, Montserrat's works are firmly situated within the ecology of Yorkshire but move outwards to connect with discourses and histories of Britain and Britishness, imperial legacies and Black Atlantic politics.

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[309] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8. I cite this work, though I am uncomfortable with the way it assumes the guilt of the five men known as the Central Park Five and uses their conviction unquestioningly to make an argument about place and rape.
[310] Cresswell, 10.
[311] Jeff Malpas, "Introduction," in *The Intelligence of Place: Topographies and Poetics*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Illustrated edition (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 4.

Nation and race are thornily intertwined in English political discourse and place-based rhetoric has played an important role in this relationship. In the post-imperial England of the 1960s, Enoch Powell, a senior Conservative member of parliament, mobilized place-based rhetoric to support racist anti-Black and anti-immigration policies. Historian David Olusoga frames Powell's rhetoric as an attempt to focus on a fantasy of unbroken "homogeneity and continuity" of England, unchanged by four hundred years of imperialism.[312] In a speech delivered to the Royal Society of St George in 1961 he started and ended his speech with the romantic imagery of the rootedness of "ancient" English oaks growing out of the English soil. Powell conscripted trees and soil into a solidarity with white imperial amnesia and into an explicitly race-based vision of Englishness.

For 900 years, Britishness was determined by geography: through *ius solis* literally, "the law of the soil" those born on British soil were British citizens. [313] But with the expansion of empire and the resulting migration, politicians debated just which soil counts as British. These issues became heightened in the post-war, post-colonial years when significant numbers of Commonwealth citizens (including Montserrat's father) migrated to Britain. In 1981, Margaret Thatcher's government passed the British Nationality Act which changed British citizenship from the spatial principle of *ius solis*, to a racial principle that granted right of abode in the United

[312] David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, Main Market edition (London: Pan, 2017), 12.
[313] Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8.

Kingdom to those whose parents or grandparents had been born in the United Kingdom. The seeming intention of the law was to deny British citizenship to the children of individuals who had immigrated to Britain from the empire/commonwealth and to affirm citizenship for those whose grandparents had left Britain for the colonies a generation earlier. In this racial calculus, Blackness was only imported in the last generation, a simple but effective fallacy that solidified existing racial prejudice and white supremacy into the law and determined legal belonging. With the slide from *ius solis* to blood lineage as the legal determiner of citizenship, geography and blood, though importantly different, function in the social imaginary as a progression—the new law of blood lineage is imagined to have closed the door to uninvited guests, confirming the original whiteness of the soil. From this discursive soil grows, as scholar Hazel Carby describes it, the imagined "rootedness of Englishness."[314]

Analyzing the role of place in colonial and postcolonial British literature, Ian Baucom argues that "Englishness has consistently been defined through the identity-endowing properties of place."[315] Not only was citizenship and belonging inherited from the soil, but in the words of Jacqueline Nassy Brown: "An essentially English spirit arises mystically from the very soil of England and accounts for historical processes. Just beholding an English place could put one under its irreversible

[314] Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*, Illustrated edition (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2019), 105.
[315] Baucom, *Out of Place*, 4.

spell."[316] Building from Baucom, in her study of geographies of race in Black Liverpool, Brown argues that Britons make place matter in two ways: "through phenomenological premises that explain the social through ostensibly unmediated visual perceptions of place; and second, through the use of "specific" or "particular" social characteristics and relations to define a place."[317] This tightly bound relationship of identity and place has not only been wielded by the powerful to the ends of exclusion but is also the language of counternarratives of belonging. For example, Brown, Baucom and Paul Gilroy all argue in different ways, that uprisings of Black and Asian youth in Handsworth and Brixton in 1981 also asserted a place-based identity.[318] Brown contends that "place emerges as both object and weapon…expressing both Englishness and its alternatives."[319]

I read Montserrat's work within these pre-existing discourses of *ius solis* and the "folk phenomenology" of identity and place, understanding these as the discursive environs within and against which she produces work and which have shaped her own experience of the terrain.[320] I argue that Montserrat's interactions with the materials of the ecosystem offer an entirely different "law of the soil," in which vulnerability, empathy, and curious co-presence determine belonging with a place. Enmeshed in the web of ecologies that includes human and nonhuman forms of life,

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[316] Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.
[317] Brown, 31.
[318] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).
[319] Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 64–65.
[320] Brown, 12.

Montserrat reveals the workings of power and difference, building creative solidarities to reimagine her community and her relationships within it.

To make the trio of films *Peat*, *Cage*, and *Clay*, Montserrat and her collaborators, filmmakers Caitlin and Anj Webb-Ellis, snuck uninvited onto the four-hundred-acre Newgate Estate in North Yorkshire on which she grew up. Each of the three films takes a distinct location and habitat within the estate and records a performance to camera by Montserrat. The videos are named simply and briefly for the material that Montserrat interacts with in each habitat: clay, peat, and a cage found in the woods.[321] Webb-Ellis refers to these as vignettes, emphasizing the videos' immediacy, brevity, and lack of narrative.[322] In their filmmaking practice, Webb-Ellis often work for months or years with a community, developing films and installations through collaboration. The resulting films present multiple simultaneous perspectives and draw attention to embodied knowledge and relationality. In the case of this trilogy, the filmmakers followed Montserrat's lead, documenting, and editing the videos of performances that Montserrat conceived and enacted.

In this first half of the chapter, I analyze each piece separately and then collectively consider the circumstances of their creation through trespass and collaboration. I argue that the three films make visible Montserrat's sense of

[321] Both *Peat* and *Clay* have been exhibited and are currently available to view online. As of this writing, *Cage* has not been exhibited in full because of its sensitive content. I was fortunate enough to be invited to watch *Cage* with the makers to create a series of short films that discuss the work which have been exhibited in place of the work itself.

[322] "Jade Montserrat," Webb-Ellis, accessed March 22, 2021, https://www.webb-ellis.org/project/collaboration-with-jade-montserrat/.

alienation within the social ecologies of the region, but that through her practices of embodied collaboration with the landscapes she jostles and dislodges the exclusionary imaginary that intertwines whiteness and English landscapes and asserts her own intimacy with the land.

Peat

In the 6-minutes of *Peat* (2015) Montserrat moves across marshy peat bogs, striding through tall, pale grasses, jumping, and splashing in the brown wet ground (figure 29). A drone camera follows her, staying close but, until the final 30 seconds, failing to fully capture her in its frame, instead giving a glimpse of wet toes or fingers, then legs, clad in black, running just out of reach. The motion of the camera is at times disorienting. In the last shots where we see Montserrat's whole body jumping up and down in the dark maroon peat, her feet are stained as if jumping in the ground's red wound. The wordless 6 minutes of *Peat* revel in the pleasures of a springy, splashy, moist bog, but under the watch of a lurking, claustrophobically close, eye in the sky.

Figure 29 Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis. Still from *Peat*, 2015 HD video, sound, 6 min. Image courtesy of the artists.

Figure 30 Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis. Still from *Peat*, 2015 HD video, sound, 6 min. Image courtesy of the artists.

The location of the filming was dictated by a childhood memory of Montserrat's. Around the age of five she was brought to this peat bog by her mother

and future stepfather. She remembers: "being intrigued by the environment which was completely different from anything I'd experienced before…I'd wanted to take the peat bog to the nature table…at school, to show my friends."[323] When invited to participate in a conference on the Black experience in Northern Britain, Montserrat turned to this ecosystem which inspired her awe as a child.

The moors of Northern England are a distinctive environment that are associated, in what Brown calls the "folk phenomenology" of place, with the activities of peat-cutting and grouse and pheasant hunting.[324] Until the early twentieth century, peat was the primary source of domestic fuel for farming communities in the Yorkshire Dales, where peat cutting was for centuries a form of collective labor and villagers had the right to cut peat (right of turbary) on the common moors.[325] According to Montserrat: "The deepest peat-bog deposits worked on in the vicinity were Peat Bog Moor on the Hackness Estate near the Falcon Inn off the Scarborough to Whitby Road. Here all the tenants of the estate had right of turbary."[326] Her moments of extended and rhythmic jumping within the bog mimic a form of repetitive labor. The hovering, chasing camera gives a sense of fugitivity to Montserrat's movements and a lurking sense of danger. Montserrat describes the movement as her "boring into the earth… to try and get into the ground to be shielded

[323] Jade Montserrat, interview by Alexandra Moore, August 27, 2021.
[324] Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 11.
[325] Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby, *Life and Tradition in the Yorkshire Dales* (Clapham: Dalesman Publishing Company Ltd, 1981), 102.
[326] Montserrat, "Clay," 2017, 57.

from the possibilities of the drone."[327] The view from above that Montserrat and Webb-Ellis employ here with the use of a drone-mounted camera, recalls a long history of this view by colonial and neocolonial powers as a form of domination or "prelude to violence."[328] In particular, it recalls images of people running for their life from military drones that circulate and track their targets for hours or days before attacking, reflecting the financial and military links between Britain and the ongoing violence in the Middle East.[329] Montserrat had these violent potentials of the drone in her mind while making *Peat* and the film captures her sense of anxiety.

At several points, the camera settles upon Montserrat's feet in the mud (figure 30), creating an image echoed in Montserrat's painting *You'll have to be on your toes to survive these parts* (2015) (figure 31). The painting is based upon a photograph of Montserrat's feet from the day of the *Peat* performance and, like many of Montserrat's watercolors, it weaves together several personal and cultural references.[330] The piece depicts two feet drawn as if looking down on them from

[327] Montserrat, interview, August 27, 2021.
[328] Steve Coll, "The Unblinking Stare," The New Yorker, accessed May 18, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/unblinking-stare.
[329] According to Montserrat, her stepfather's family made money through arms dealing, a financial relationship between these moor owners and UK military power echoed by journalist Guy Shrubsole's research into arms deals and land ownership in the UK. Guy Shrubsole, *Who Owns England?* (London: William Collins, 2019), 123–24.
[330] Montserrat lifted the pink and white flowers from a box of chocolates that she received from art patron Anthony D'Offay. Montserrat has since accused D'Offay of racialized and gendered sexual harassment and abuse, and the use of the flowers from his gift in concert with the text, conjures the pernicious control and danger lurking behind the seemingly harmless and decorative box of chocolates. Painted within each foot is a representation of the large stone Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan as they looked before their destruction by the Taliban in 2001. This image again ties the Peat bog to military use of the drones in the middle east but also references the 2007 film *The Buddha Collapsed in Shame* which is set in Bamayan, below the now empty caves where the Buddhas once sat. In this film, a young Afghani girl desperately wants to go to school but is thwarted by hostility and indifference.

above, resting upon a green ground with pink and white flowers and pale-yellow leaves. Weaving between the feet, in pale yellow text it reads: “You have to be on your toes to survive in these parts,” contrasting the decorative ground with an ominous sentiment. The painting alludes to potential danger and destruction and Montserrat’s experiences of hostility and disempowerment. Read next to the painting, the sense of danger and discomfort created by the drone view in *Peat* becomes heightened.

Figure 31 Jade Montserrat, *You'll have to be on your toes to survive these parts*, 2015, watercolor, gouache, pencil and pencil crayon on paper 25 x 17.7 cm

Speaking of this peat bog Montserrat says: “At the present day the bog, situated in the midst of trees planted by the Forestry Commission, is not as deep as it was and is confined to one acre.” Montserrat suggests that this peatland is in a deteriorated state.

Today, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the majority of UK peatlands are in a vulnerable and deteriorated condition, with only 20 percent in a "near-natural" state.[331] Peatland are vital and rare habitats: they are biodiverse, serve an important role in carbon capture, and protect against flooding.[332] The 2000 Countryside Rights of Way Act opened all moorland in England to the public, but how would the public know that this small, enclosed bog is here?[333] And how would a public reach it without trespassing?

One reason for the damage to peatland ecosystems is the large scale of grouse and pheasant hunting. Because shoots charge a high price for the honor of killing the grouse and advertise by number of birds expected to be available for shooting, shooting estates invest in keeping grouse numbers high.[334] Grouse and pheasant shooting are undoubtedly the domains of the landed class or the aspirational bourgeois—a single "gun" for a single day often costs several hundred pounds.[335] By one approximation, people pay seventy-five pounds per dead bird.[336] One of the

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[331] "Peatland Damage," IUCN Peatland Programme, accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/about-peatlands/peatland-damage.
[332] "Analysis: Why Yorkshire's Peatlands Are Worth Protecting," York Press, accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/15096623.analysis-why-yorkshires-peatlands-are-worth-protecting/.
[333] Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass: Crossing the Lines That Divide Us*, 1st edition (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 223.
[334] According to a 2017 real estate brochure, the Highdales shoot at Newgate is: "a pheasant shoot with 10 guns, and 11 days per season. There are around 5000 birds put down of which approximately 40% are shot and the average bag hovers in the region of 200 birds per day." "The Newgate Estate" (Scarborough: Boulton Cooper Realtors, 2017), 8.
[335] "Grouse Shooting - Shoots & Availability," GunsOnPegs, accessed February 9, 2021, https://www.gunsonpegs.com.
[336] Mark Avery, "Grouse Shooting: Half a Million Reasons Why Time's up for This Appalling Victorian 'Sport,'" *The Guardian*, August 12, 2017, sec. Opinion, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/12/grouse-shooting-glorious-twelfth-times-up-for-inglorious-victorian-sport.

strategies employed by gamekeepers to increase populations is to burn the peatland, encouraging the new heather growth that grouse feed on, but it also dries out the peat and is devastating for other inhabitants of the ecosystem. Studies by Leeds University have shown the destructive effects of grouse hunting on the health of the peat ecosystem, including damaging the carbon capture potential, loss of biodiversity, and increased risk of flooding.[337] In *Peat,* both Montserrat and the peatland are vulnerable and under attack.

Despite the looming presence of the camera and its seeming pursuit of Montserrat, throughout the video, Montserrat is playfully present within the ecosystem, her toes mingling with the marshy muddy water, her movement following openings within the grasses. Montserrat moves her limbs and explores textures in gestures that seem to bask in sensation for sensation's sake. Sarah Jane Cervenak describes Montserrat's mingling with the moor as "Parahuman occasionings of mixed-up flesh/plant/water/atmospheric matter. Collaborations that draw on their prior but forgotten alreadyness in sustaining vitalities of otherwise besieged flesh and earth."[338] She suggests that in her "being-with peat" Montserrat "momentarily suspends the telos of extraction."[339] Said differently, Montserrat's choreography embraces the moor as a collaborator—or a connective tissue--rather than a resource for fuel or grouse breeding. As I watch Montserrat's splashing feet, I imagine the way

[337] Lee Brown, Joseph Holden, and Sheila Palmer, "Effects of Moorland Burning on the Ecohydrology of River Basins. Key Findings from the EMBER Project." (University of Leeds, 2014), https://water.leeds.ac.uk/our-missions/mission-1/ember/.
[338] Cervenak, "With."
[339] Cervenak.

the camera is circling around and following Montserrat, and that the two are responding to each other. This is a collaborative, in motion rendition of landscape that encompasses human and nonhuman relationships.

In *Peat*, Montserrat imagines herself into the role of Heathcliff, Emily Brontë's racially ambiguous wildling of the moors from *Wuthering Heights*.[340] Describing *Peat*, Montserrat says: "Heathcliff, representative of the dispossessed, and I are aliens dropped into this ancient landscape. Appearances suggest that we were not meant to be here."[341] By performing as Heathcliff, Montserrat summons the suppressed connections between rural British landscapes and the trade in enslaved Africans and related stigma against mixed-race individuals. [342] As signifier of the networks of the slave trade Heathcliff draws attention to the significant amount of English wealth that was generated through both the trade in enslaved Africans and plantation economies. In 1833, when the British government abolished slavery in the colonies and compensated those who were losing an investment and source of income, between five and ten percent of British estates were occupied by slave owners.[343] The North-

[340] Montserrat made the work specifically in response to Caryll Phillips novel *The Lost Child*, which moves between the imagined early life of Heathcliff, the life of the Brontë's and a mixed-race family in 1980s, all living in proximity to the Yorkshire moors.
[341] Montserrat, "Clay," 2017, 55.
[342] The Brontës were aware of people within their social orbit who profited from the slave trade and these relationships made it into their novels. There is slight disagreement amongst scholars as to whether Heathcliff was intended to read as a character of specifically African descent or whether it was his racial indeterminacy that made him a salient character. Though I am slightly more persuaded by the second and more recent argument, both functions of Heathcliff are relevant for *Peat*. Christopher Heywood, "Yorkshire Slavery in Wuthering Heights," *The Review of English Studies* 38, no. 150 (1987): 194; Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 26.
[343] Nicholas Draper, "Slave Ownership and the British Country House: The Records of the Slave Compensation Commission as Evidence," in *Slavery and the British Country House*, ed. Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, 2013, 20.

West, encompassing the areas around the trading centers of Liverpool and Manchester, had a higher percentage than the national average (reaffirming that it is unsurprising that Bronte interwove this reality into her novel). Though the Newgate Estate has not been directly linked to the slave trade, the UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership (LBS) map which documents the British homes of the 1833 beneficiaries of government compensation, includes the nearby estates of Newton House and Sneaton Castle.[344] These geographies of interconnection and the tangible relationship between Atlantic slavery and rural landscapes of the UK, though visible to Brontë in her time, have, until recently, rarely been highlighted in discussions of heritage, landscapes, and country estates.[345] As an embodiment of racial anxiety, Heathcliff reflects the stigma against people of mixed racial heritage that was already present in 1847. This prejudice can be seen in the 1928 *Fletcher Report* which pathologized the children of African seamen and white women in Liverpool and again after World War II when white British women who had had babies with Black Americans stationed in the UK faced housing and job discrimination.[346] Montserrat's summoning of Heathcliff suggests the imperial haunting of the present and speaks to the narratives of out-of-placeness that have been projected onto her.

[344] "Map" (London: Legacies of British Slavery, UCL Department of History), accessed March 2, 2021, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain/#zoom=11&lng=-0.609741&lat=54.443294&address_id=2118253813.
[345] For specific examples, see Caroline Bressey, "Contesting the Political Legacy of Slavery in England's Country Houses: A Case Study of Kenwood House and Osborne House," in *Slavery and the British Country House*, ed. Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (English Heritage, 2013), 114–22.
[346] Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 37; Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, 102.

When comparing herself to Heathcliff in the quote above, Montserrat refers to the landscape of the moor as ancient and contrasts this to her and Heathcliff as alien newcomers. There is nothing intrinsic in the landscape that suggests that Montserrat does not belong, but in referring to the land as "ancient" and herself and Heathcliff as "aliens" Montserrat draws attention to the way that people with brown skin and tightly curled hair have been repeatedly positioned as outsiders and newcomers. The framing of this landscape as ancient, points to the "imaginative geographies that reified global segregations" during the life of European imperialism.[347] As geographer Katherine McKittrick points out, this was a spatial and racial logic:

> The Americas and Africa, for example, were tagged as geographically inferior, based on an 'Old' World European temporal schema that deemed the biospheric matter of these regions 'newer' than the soil, earth, air, and water of Europe…a space that was at once 'nowhere' and inhabited by 'no one.'[348]

According to McKittrick, the very matter of the land was brought into this spatial, temporal, and racial schema which suggests that Montserrat (and Heathcliff) might be "out of place." The imagined ancientness of English soil does double duty, justifying first policies of expansion into "newer" terrains with more "primitive" people and then later policies of racist exclusion such as the UK Home Office's hostile environment policy.

Notes in Montserrat's sketchbook suggest that her feelings of alienation came from social interactions, but that the land itself had felt to her like a place of belonging. She writes:

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[347] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 5.
[348] McKittrick, 6.

> [It] wasn't that I took the immediate landscape for granted during childhood, as neither Catherine nor Heathcliff did, I truly felt a part of it—a wholeness, a knowing—a mysterious self and human assurance. People populated my dreams, and these people were unknown quantities—a reversal or mirror reflecting how I was treated—often unbelonging, Other.[349]

Though Montserrat acknowledges her sense of alienation and Montserrat and Webb-Ellis enact the sense of unwelcomeness through the drone view and Montserrat's constant movement, the film also points to Montserrat's sense of belonging & knowing, enacting a determined intimacy with the spongey, wet ground. In the final scene of the film, the drone hovers above Montserrat, dressed all in black, as she jumps up and down in the bog, her Afro bouncing around her head and her feet covered in a dark sheen of marsh water. Though Montserrat describes herself as "alien" in this "ancient landscape," and the video captures a sense of being under threat, her actions within the video suggest quite the opposite: that she knows her way through the moors and feels connected to the peatland. The sense of wholeness and knowing she notes in her sketchbook comes into sight, though as a desire under duress.

Cage[350]

Like *Peat*, *Cage* (2015) makes visible Montserrat's feeling of unwelcomeness in the ecosystem and particularly draws attention to the violence of hunting as a form of pleasure and profit in these scenes, while finding forms of collaboration and solidarity within the larger ecosystem of human and nonhuman beings. Montserrat's performance in *Cage* references violent acts she saw as a child, her own feelings of

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[349] Jade Montserrat, *Blue Notebook*, 2015.

[350] I published a modified version of this section as a short work in progress in *Art Journal*. I am grateful to *Art Journal* for permission to include the text here and to the anonymous peer reviewers who gave me thoughtful critiques. Alexandra Moore, "Reading and Witnessing Cage by Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis," *Art Journal* 81, no. 2 (July 2022): 100–109.

alienation and entrapment, and a long history of capture and fetishization of people deemed "Other," within which England is deeply entangled and which have informed her own lived experiences.

The video documentation of *Cage* is 4 minutes long. Montserrat is cramped and contorted into a metal cage used by gamekeepers in the area for trapping foxes. The metal trap is within a dense wood, the ground covered with a thick layer of brown leaves. Pine needles and twigs hang through the thin metal slats which have a green mossy coating (figure 32). Montserrat's head hangs down, a leaf caught within her hair. It is chilly in the woods; we see goosebumps on her skin and hear the wind rustle through the trees. The camera lingers on the tension of her taught frame and then travels along her torso. She trembles slightly. As a viewer, I do not know how long Montserrat has been crouched there, her head bent down, her fingers wound around the bars.

Figure 32 Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis. Still from *Cage,* 2015 HD video, sound, 4 min. Image provided by the artists

In this performance, Montserrat places herself in the role of an uninvited nonhuman animal: a trapped fox, ensnared within social and political frames hostile to its wellbeing. Roaming between trees and under hedges, foxes hunt for the grouse and pheasants that are plentiful in these woods and on the surrounding moors. The gamekeepers in the area trap foxes to protect the game birds, not as an act of care for the birds, but to ensure their availability to die for a price during the autumn shooting season. As euphemistically stated by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust "upland predator control" is necessary to enable a sustainable harvest of game."[351] Foxes refuse to acknowledge frameworks such as private property and disrupt the hunting economy by claiming game birds for themselves. In her study on the use of

[351] "Upland Predator Controls," Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, accessed December 29, 2020, https://www.gwct.org.uk/policy/briefings/driven-grouse-shooting/upland-predator-control/.

animals in contemporary art, Joan Kee notes that more legal rights are granted to species seen as more proximate to humans, such as companion animals like dogs, than to animals considered distant or "alienated from" humans.[352] Within this framework, the fox is liminal—familiar and native to the UK, but often viewed as a pest and a scavenger. Foxes, though of the land, are unwelcome and out of place.

Cage makes visceral a feeling of entrapment and undesired vulnerability in relation to an unidentified dominating presence lurking within the darkness of the woods. Growing up, Montserrat empathized with the animals she saw being killed in these woods. In our conversation Montserrat stated: "[As a child] what was indistinct for me was the difference between an animal trap or a man trap."[353] She suggests a shared sense of danger and vulnerability—that the traps felt threatening not just to animals but to herself. On one occasion, Montserrat herself was shot at by a deer stalker. In an article cowritten with curator Daniella Ross King, they write:

> These violences, of misrecognition, of being made to feel as other, of being dehumanised, of being subjected to gun shots as land is hunted (and private property is protected), are not so dissimilar to the violences carried out on black bodies within urban spaces. The real threat of violence from landowners' agency (enshrined in law) to discourage "trespassers" with the use of guns in these supposedly sublime rural settings, constitutes a form of terror and territorialization in the "pastoral" landscape.[354]

King and Montserrat connect the microaggressions and misrecognitions that Montserrat experienced (and continues to experience) to the explicit violence of gun shots in rural spaces and the ongoing experiences of antiblack racism that have been

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[352] Joan Kee, "The Animal Question via Art and Law," *Law & Literature* 33, no. 3 (February 25, 2021): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685X.2021.1885156.
[353] Jade Montserrat, Caitlin Webb-Ellis, and Anj Webb-Ellis, Interview with author, interview by Alexandra Moore, August 14, 2020.
[354] King and Montserrat, "(Some Possibilities of) Rural Belongings," 267.

more typically associated with urban settings in the UK. A generation earlier, artist Ingrid Pollard drew attention to the tension between the whitewashed imaginaries of rural England and her own lived experiences in a series of hand tinted prints titled *Pastoral Interlude* (1987). One image shows a Black woman seated by a fence topped with barbed wire in front of green rolling hills receding into the distance. The image is accompanied by text that states: "a visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread."[355] In another piece in the series the text says: "Walks through leafy glades with a baseball bat by my side," suggesting the need of the rambler to protect herself from physical attacks.[356] Echoing Pollard's sentiments, King and Montserrat refer to the "British idyll" of the countryside as "a sort of gothic fiction; another alienating, excluding, potentially life threatening, vampiric environment."[357] In conversation, Montserrat referenced Charles Perrault's fairytales illustrated by Gustave Doré as influencing her childhood imaginings of the woods, and something of those shadowy, foreboding scenes informs *Cage*.[358] The piece presents the Yorkshire wood not as an idyll but as an uncomfortable nightmare for those deemed out of place.

Montserrat's performance points the viewer to look closely at the relationship between racialization and animalization. In the quotation above, King and Montserrat use the term "dehumanization" to characterize one facet of their experiences of

[355] Ingrid Pollard, *Ingrid Pollard: Postcards Home* (London: Chris Boot, 2004), 21.
[356] Pollard, 23.
[357] King and Montserrat, "(Some Possibilities of) Rural Belongings," 267.
[358] Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Webb-Ellis, Interview with author.

racism. The word emphasizes the long history of white supremacist ideologies that have labeled Black peoples as less-than or not-quite human, and it does important work to convey related forms of subjugation and violence. However, this term takes for granted a human/animal split and doesn't account for the way that, as Zakkiyah Iman Jackson argues, "discourses on nonhuman animals and animalized humans are forged through each other."[359] Jackson's analysis unpacks how anti-Blackness and human exploitation or abuse of other species are intertwined forms of domination that feed and inform each other. Relatedly, in her study on the relationships between discourses of race and animality across the Black Atlantic, Bénédicte Boisseron calls for an understanding of "interspecies alliances" that highlights shared defiance against structures of domination.[360] Montserrat's *Cage* does this work as she finds common cause with the fox and bears witness to the violence meted out against foxes because they refuse to comply with property lines in regard to land or prey. To cage a being, whether a fox or a woman, asserts a right of dominion over that being. It renders the fox/woman not just out of place but as a being that no longer has sovereignty over their own body. Montserrat's gesture towards interspecies solidarity suggests that both she and the fox are seen as unruly and out of place and share a sense of vulnerability within the current social and legal systems that govern the woods.

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[359] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (NYU Press, 2020), 23.
[360] Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 36.

Figure 33 Jade Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Alexandra Moore, still from *Cage*, 2020, digital art project. Image courtesy of the artists.

Montserrat's performance of *Cage* belongs within a genealogy of people negotiating their agency and expressing their experiences of entrapment, fetishization, and domination within the spaces and discourses available to them. *Cage* recalls the performances of Sarah Bartmann, the enslaved Khoisan woman brought to England in 1810 by British showman Hendrick Cezar and forced to perform under the label of the Hottentot Venus. Through reading the archival traces of Bartmann, scholar Yvette Abrahams argues that she ruptured the invisibility of institutional violence against Black women through her performances. When for example Bartmann's defiance forced Cezar to threaten her with a stick or close her cage door during a performance the largely white British audiences were forced to see Bartmann as caged and to become conscious of the types of violence experienced by Black women daily in the

colonies. In Abrahams words: "Her art and her resistance, was to make the violence embedded in these social relations visible."[361]

Another relevant precedent is Josephine Baker. Montserrat has performed a routine of Baker's on several occasions, including once for 24 hours, livestreamed to sites in the UK and US where Baker performed—a durational feat. The rural and unglamorous locale of a Yorkshire wood may not obviously reflect Baker, but the endurance, animality, and even the cage, all reflect Baker's performances. One of Montserrat's references for *Cage* was a still from the 1934 film *Zouzou* (figure 33). In the scene, Baker as the fictional titular character sits in a giant gilded bird cage and sings longingly for Haiti, pining that even the most beautiful cage is really a prison. Here Baker is, as she often did, playing with and into French desire, but also perhaps alluding to an entrapment she felt within the roles made available to her in French films and society—though famous and wealthy, her freedom had limits. In addition to an exotic bird, Baker also impersonated a "panther, serpent, and gorilla in her dance moves."[362] In her writing on the discursive relationship between Blackness and animality in Baker's performances, Boisseron asks, "to what extent are Josephine Baker's animal impersonations not only a white-crowd-pleasing performance but also a means to reclaim her voice in a sort of auto-interpellation[?]"[363] Boisseron suggests we read Baker's knowing embrace of animality as a simultaneous embrace and

[361] Yvette Abrahams, "Colonialism, Dysfunction and Disjuncture: Sarah Bartmann's Resistance (Remix)," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58 (2003): 20.
[362] Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, 35.
[363] Boisseron, 36.

rejection of the predominant French society that exotified and fetishized her—her evocation of the animal as a mode of defiance of French norms and expectations.

More recently, Montserrat's performance of being caged echoes the performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-93) by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in which the two artists presented themselves at various museums and art galleries in a cage. In this performance they purposefully performed "the identity of an Other" and evoked the long practice of white Europeans and North Americans exhibiting non-white people from Asia, Africa, and the Americas.[364] Yorkshire is as much enmeshed in this history as London, Paris, or New York: In 1905, Colonel Harrison of Brandesburton Hall in North Yorkshire journeyed to the Congo Free State and brought back 6 individuals from the Ituri Forest.[365] These individuals, unnamed and referred to by Harrison and the British press at the time as "pygmies," were put on display by Harrison at various locations around Britain, including at Brandesburton Hall. In an article contextualizing their "intercultural performance" Fusco, revealed her own experiences of racist fetishization and harassment by an older, white French filmmaker at the beginning of her career.[366] Montserrat has also spoken publicly about her experiences of racist and sexist harassment and abuse, including by a prominent British collector and Tate curator.[367]

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[364] Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR (1988-)* 38, no. 1 (1994): 143, https://doi.org/10.2307/1146361.
[365] Jeffrey Green, "Edwardian Britain's Forest Pygmies," *History Today* 45, no. 8 (August 1995): 33.
[366] Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," 166.
[367] Chaminda Jayanetti, "The Tate 'Banned' a Black Artist After She Called Out an Art Dealer's Sexual Abuse," *Vice*, March 18, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7vxqx/tate-antho.

Like Fusco, Montserrat's performance within the cage communicates an experience of living ensnared within colonial imaginaries, including as reproduced by art institutions.

The connections I have made here to Baartman, Baker, Fusco and Gómez-Peña, and the unnamed individuals from the Ituri Forest, situate Montserrat's performance within a constellation of objectification and racialized fetishization under colonial regimes. Fusco argues that the history of Performance Art in the West begins in 1493 with the Spanish kidnap and display of an Arawark individual.[368] Similarly, Uri McMillan starts his history of black feminist performance art in 1835 with the performances of an enslaved woman under the name of Joice Heth.[369] McMillan centers the experiences and performances of black women as a way into performance art, arguing that performing objecthood has been a strategy for claiming and complicating subjecthood in contexts where that subjecthood is questioned or placed under duress.[370] Fusco and McMillan both understand performance art as a mode of acknowledging and manipulating the gap between a performer's interior subjectivity and a subjectivity projected by viewers. In all these examples, though a performance may be rooted in domination and misrecognition it hopes to critique and

[368] Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," 146.
[369] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Sexual Cultures (New York: University Press, 2015).
[370] McMillan, 9.

exceed those experiences. Having said this, such performances can also be interpreted as restaging the very dynamics they hope to critique.[371]

Caitlin Webb-Ellis expressed that making *Cage* felt like a leap of faith and she spoke to a tension between wanting to help Montserrat realize her vision, while feeling a trepidation about acting as the potentially violent gaze.[372] In witnessing the performance and acting in consensual collaboration with Montserrat, Caitlin and Anj, who are both white, were invited to observe their own positionality within the networks of liveliness and domination in that wood. The care and attention of the camera in *Cage* moves the piece beyond simply representing the shared experience of Montserrat and the fox, to an image that is troubling but also tender. Though performing a form of entrapment, the performance of *Cage* was an act of trust and vulnerability between Montserrat and her collaborators and through the witnessing and filming of the performance together, the three artists fostered intimacy and community with each other. Speaking of watching the film five years after the performance, Montserrat states: "Coming back to it I was struck by the strange beauty. My memory of it was so violent, because I was coming to it with that, [but] within that there is this beauty that I'd forgotten."[373]

[371] For this reason, Montserrat and Webb-Ellis chose not to exhibit *Cage* until 2020 and have carefully controlled the context of its display and circulation. I worked with them on a digital art project for this purpose, available at https://www.platformartprojects.com/p-0120-rising/jm-we-am.
[372] Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Webb-Ellis, Interview with author.
[373] Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Webb-Ellis.

Figure 34. Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis. Still from *Clay*, 2015 HD video, sound, 9 min. Image courtesy of the artists.

Clay

The nine-minute film *Clay*, (2015) begins overlooking a green field, with woods behind. The field has been dug up, so that there is a bank of exposed clay, in front of which Montserrat crouches. She is slightly obscured from the viewer by blades of tall, spiky grass in the foreground. Montserrat carefully and thoroughly washes her hands and arms with the wet clay. The screen then cuts to a closer look at Montserrat and the ground she sits upon. The ground is dappled through with ochre, tawny, and grey. Montserrat rubs layers along her arms and thighs, rubs chunks of clay into her hair (figure 34). Sitting in muddy water, covering her whole body, Montserrat slowly blends into the ground. Returning to a distanced perspective, the viewer watches Montserrat move larger and larger chunks of earth, widening and deepening the area with considerable physical effort. And then she kneels, prostrate and unmoving, with

her torso lying into the muddy bank (figure 35). For the last three minutes, the viewer watches her stay still, blending quietly back into the Earth as the wind blows around her.

Figure 35. Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis. Still from *Clay*, 2015 HD video, sound, 9 min. Image courtesy of the artists.

The landscape in which Montserrat buries herself is at first glance an idyllic picture of a gentle sloping green field abutting a wood. Because Montserrat and the camera remain still for one-third of the video, the scenic location of a green hill, and the central horizon line, this video most directly recalls a landscape painting. The gauge in the field that has exposed the clay for this performance (according to Montserrat, the result of diverting water pipes), is echoed by a slice of brown bare hillside where a section of forest has been logged.[374] The forest was planted in 1950

[374] Jade Montserrat, "Clay," *Shades of Noir* (blog), September 14, 2017, https://shadesofnoir.org.uk/jade-montserrat-clay/.

as a monoculture Sitka spruce plantation, of the type planted all over the UK by the Forestry Commission. Rather than ecological, aesthetic, or social concerns, these forests were built for the function of fueling an army. Though in recent years this wood has been somewhat diversified, it remains a commercial forest. The socio-ecological landscape Montserrat performs within is both constructed and destructive. This is quite different from the attitude of humility and vulnerability that Montserrat brings into the scene.

The actions that Montserrat took over the course of the performance were an improvisational and sculptural response to the mud pit which she and the filmmakers found at the site.[375] During the film, she makes mud pies, builds up mud banks, and slowly covers her body. As with *Peat*, the actions are executed with the commitment and rhythm of manual labor, though here the outcomes of her labors do have visible physical impacts on the terrain as well as her body. About her actions, Montserrat says, "Using the clay as I did, was very reminiscent of my time as a child there…my first time making anything that could be described as sculpture was making objects out of that clay."[376] The mud pies in particular point to Montserrat's experiences as a child in this landscape. A painting in her sketchbook from the time of the creation of these videos, depicts nine mud pies made in a Yorkshire pudding tin (figure 36). In conversation, Montserrat speaks of the freedom and relief she experienced as a child while playing in the clay outside the cottage where she lived. "It is a really evocative

[375] Jade Montserrat, interview by Alexandra Moore, September 27, 2019.
[376] Montserrat.

and strong memory of absolute surrender for me in that moment. Total absorption and purpose."[377] Montserrat's actions with the clay revisit this time of early creativity and freedom in the terrain.

Figure 36. Jade Montserrat's blue notebook, 2015-2016. Image courtesy of the artist.

Clay is a malleable medium associated with multiple rich traditions of artistic practice. British sculptor Anthony Gormley describes working with it:

> There is a feeling when you use it that you are repeating some primal transformation of the unformed to the formed…I would like to reverse the old hierarchies in that sense too, because clay is a medium that can become an extension of the flesh in a way that no other material can.[378]

[377] Jade Montserrat, interview by Alexandra Moore, July 3, 2021.
[378] Anthony Gormley, "In Conversation with James Putnam," in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 32.

Gormley describes working with clay as a form or primal creativity, a material in which seemingly nothing can become something. Rather than unsophisticated he experiences it as foundational and "an extension of the flesh." In this description, clay is not just an organic matter with the potential to become useful or fashion a representation, but a material of closeness between human and nonhuman. Given these properties, it is not surprising that clay is a participant in several of humanity's origin stories. Towards the end of the performance, when Montserrat's torso, arms, hands, and legs are covered with a thick layer of material, she looks like a clay sculpture come to life. Montserrat, covering herself in clay, sculpts herself.

The action of sculpting herself out of the earth echoes Montserrat's concrete and legal form of self-making, by changing her last name to de Montserrat. She describes her choice to change her name within structures of power and ownership:

> I changed my surname to de Montserrat (of Montserrat) in 2006 as my previous surnames of Timmons and Longstaff held no familial affiliations or affections, these previous names marking in my mind rather those acts of 'possession and right to name' that [Dionne] Brand describes of Rochester in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*.[379]

Montserrat refers to the difference between naming as a form of possession and naming as a display of kinship or affection. This distinction is reflected in her relationship with the landscape of Hackness: during her childhood some of the landscape was named after her—the pond into which the water pipe flows was once known as Jade's Pond and an area of wood behind her was referred to as Jade's Wood. These weren't legal names, and those landscapes were not her legal property.

[379] Montserrat, "Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project," 56–57.

Instead, they were part of her imaginative landscape, a site where she moved and played. The names acknowledged a child's familiarity and relationality. By sculpting herself with the material of the land she again symbolically takes control of her origin story, choosing to embed herself into this place. "Physically I belong to that landscape and that landscape completely belongs to me. But I have been ostracized from that landscape."[380] Her performance asserts her right to continue to be in relationship with this land outside the bounds of relationships established through ownership.

Kneeling prostrate in the mud, enclosed by grasses, Montserrat acts out a form of relational intimacy with the soil. The colors of Montserrat's body—her bare light brown skin, the patches covered in a wet tawny clay and the areas covered in a dried, paler grey clay—reflect the mottled patchwork of browns and greys in the exposed ground. Montserrat's embedding of herself within the clay connects to her series of watercolor paintings in which she depicts her body as and through the landscape. For instance, in *In Tune with the Infinite* (2015) her hand emerges from the sea (a reference to the transatlantic slave trade), grows up into a grey clay ground (again transformed into small circular mud pies), and blooms branches of Sitka spruce (figure 37).[381] The skin of the hand is covered with delicate scales, a motif that Montserrat adapted from a 15th century print depicting Noah's ark.[382] The tiles on her

[380] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.
[381] Jade Montserrat, Virtual Studio Visit, interview by Alexandra Moore, April 29, 2021. Montserrat stated: "The sea I think always is this reference to the transatlantic slave trade and system. I think when that is coming in that is always going to be there."
[382] Montserrat.

hand imagine the body as a vessel that has endured and the skin as an organ of protection and survival.

Figure 37 Jade Montserrat, *In Tune with the Infinite*, 2015 watercolor, gouache, pencil and pencil crayon on paper. Photo by Damian Griffiths, courtesy of the artist and Bosse & Baum

In an interview, she refers to the land as a sanctuary and states, "Being there, just being. It is close to breathing."[383] Breathing is one of the most basic actions of being alive. Montserrat's words suggest a momentary dissolution of ego, attempting to become a part of the earth. This closely mirrors the imaginings of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, a writer of English and Kenyan heritage, in her poetry memoire *The Grassling*. In this text, which Burnett calls a dictionary of soil, she imagines the life of the soil and writes about lying on the ground, digging herself into the soil. She calls her rolling around on the earth "field swimming," imagining herself "a planted woman, resting in the earth."[384] Echoing Gormley's comparison between clay and flesh, Burnette is "grass made flesh. Grassling."[385] Like Burnett, Montserrat attempts to be a planted woman at rest in the earth, secure in her place. Both artists claim a relationship directly with the land, letting go of anthropocentric divisions and racialized hierarchies.

Clay also looks back to the *Silueta* works of Ana Mendieta. In this series, the Cuban born artist created silhouettes proportional to her body in a range of materials and locations, including digging it out of sand, creating an outline with stones, and burning a trench with gunpowder. In some, such as *Imágen de Yágul* (1973), *Creek* (1974) and *Tree of Life* (1976) Mendieta's body appears embedded within the landscapes. Montserrat's covered and prostrate form at the end of *Clay* has resonances both aesthetically and conceptually with these images of Mendieta's,

[383] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.
[384] Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *The Grassling* (Allen Lane, 2019), 148, 130.
[385] Burnett, 148.

particularly *Tree of Life* in which Mendieta has covered her body in mud and grass, rendering her form similar in color and texture to the large tree trunk she stands against. Genevieve Hyacinthe, engaging with what art historians have perceived as the disappearance of self in Mendieta's work, argues that the *Siluetas* register both a struggle for presence, particularly as a Cuban exile in the United States, and a finding of surrogate homes within different terrains.[386] *Clay* similarly engages a tension between dissolution of the individual self and a marking of presence and right to the space. In her notebook, Montserrat writes, "What happens when you carve into the landscape, dive into depths, fearful only of the precariousness of autonomy? How far can you enjoin with these landscapes→when do you become one?"[387]

According to Montserrat, when making these films: "Essentially we were trespassing…we were all hyped that we couldn't be there too long."[388] Though trespassing was not the goal of the performances and films, it became a facet of their creation and informs my reading of the final works. Because ownership of land as understood in English Common Law is an important axis of power and resource distribution and because common lands have been slowly enclosed over time, trespassing has a long political history in the UK.[389] The politics of land ownership

[386] Hyacinthe, *Radical Virtuosity*.
[387] Montserrat, *Blue Notebook*.
[388] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.
[389] Where in the late 1600s approximately one quarter of England remained common land, by 2000 this number had dropped to only three percent. The numbers continue to decrease with ongoing large-scale privatization of public lands. By trespassing and asserting their right to be on the land in these videos, Montserrat and Webb-Ellis chose to envision a different set of sociocultural relationships.

dictate the forms of relationship people can make on and with the terrain. Where lands are no longer common, the owner can legally determine who has the right to the land and for what activities. In addition to controlling resource use such as hunting for sustenance and peat-cutting for fuel, landowners also control access to any other non-productive activities for which the commons were and could be used. Montserrat says of private land ownership, "It is a violent ownership of resources which should be open to everyone; just to be able to breathe in a landscape should be open to everyone."[390] Nick Hayes writing on trespassing points out that "You have no right to be here' moves easily, with the slip of a comma, to 'you have no right to be, here, there, or anywhere.'"[391] Montserrat's performances of "just being," as seen in her minutes of extended stillness in *Clay* and her seemingly purposeless running and jumping in *Peat*, are more than a revolt against the right of landowners to exclude. They are a declaration of her own right to exist, to breathe and move freely. *Cage* reminds us of the limits she experiences on those rights.

Montserrat's performances were only possible because of her previous privileged access to the estate, a space otherwise inaccessible and unknown to uninvited or non-paying guests. Caitlin Webb-Ellis, speaks to Montserrat's particular knowledge of the area they walked through to make the works: "Jade was taking us places that were kind of off the path and intimately known to her. Giving us a really

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[390] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.
[391] Hayes, *The Book of Trespass*, 23.

different perspective on the land."[392] Because she grew up within this ecosystem Montserrat had an intimate perspective on the violence within the land and was also able to orient herself and the others, guiding them through the terrain. Although Caitlin grew up in the nearby town of Whitby, she didn't have this privileged access. Caitlin's comment points to the way familiarity and interconnection with a vast majority of English land is controlled and policed; the public has severely limited access to being in relationship with soil, peat, and trees.

The films produce the three landscapes as an interface of relationships between Montserrat, the nonhuman ecosystem, and the filmmakers. The interrelationship of camera and performer is most obvious in *Peat*, in which the camera and Montserrat are moving around each other with varying degrees of separation and closeness, but in all three of these videos the camera moves between intimate and middle distance, moving the viewer between a perspective very close to Montserrat and that of an outside observer. There is a tension between the "traditional" landscape view of the outside observer and the intimate, entangled view of Montserrat as the performer. If a landscape image has been thought of as a representation of something separate from the viewer to be contemplated at a comfortable distance, these videos draw the viewer in closer, deeper, into the literal mud and weeds. In this way, Montserrat and Webb-Ellis are amongst a growing group of artists experimenting in video with ways to visualize terrain and nonhuman forms of life in ways that de-emphasize human dominance and foreground

[392] Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Webb-Ellis, Interview with author.

interdependence. For example, Sky Hopinka overlays different temporalities and perspectives in works such as *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2017) and Carolina Caycedo rotates and kaleidoscopes the images of rivers and bends dams in her "Water Portraits" including *To Stop Being a Threat and Become a Promise* (2017). However, in those works the emphasis is on the camera's relationship to the landscape, whereas in Montserrat and Webb-Ellis' videos under discussion, the camera is always in relationship to Montserrat: she is the body through which the viewer enters the image and the terrain.

In the performances Montserrat enacts what McKittrick calls "relational versions of humanness."[393] That is a version of being human that is not invested in domination or individual advancement but exists embedded within relations across scales and species, aiming for reciprocity. These three videos enact forms of being in and with the land that are tactile, vulnerable, and personal. The forms of belonging and being that Montserrat claims when communing with the mud, dancing on the peat, or crouching in the fox trap are not ones in which the landscape and the other lives taking place within it are her property, but instead gesture toward a solidarity and interdependence with them. Her performances of interconnectedness are a critique of the boundedness of land ownership that can disconnect people from one another. In the most literal sense, growing up on a large, private estate, Montserrat was isolated. She alludes to this by expressing her desire to undo her isolation via collaboration:

[393] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 12.

> I knew that there was a real connection between my body and finding a language to describe my body in that landscape, and also how to build friendship and collaborate in that landscape because it had been so private. It literally had that sign on the gate that said "Newgate no callers, private nature reserve."[394]

Montserrat points to the loneliness embedded within the logic of private land. Critiquing the racialized exclusions if these pastoral settings, Montserrat digs in deeper, planting and nourishing herself to find sanctuary.

Charcoal

Record Recode (2017) one of Montserrat's performatively produced, impermanent charcoal murals (Montserrat uses the encompassing description "performance drawing installation"), addresses many of the same themes and experiences discussed in *Peat*, *Cage* and *Clay*. I argue that it represents Montserrat's embodied and embedded experience within rural landscapes and physically enacts a form of material entanglement between Montserrat, Yorkshire ecologies, and mural viewers. This work reasserts her position as simultaneously rooted in Yorkshire and connected to the African diaspora, interpolating viewers into community with her.

Drawn unclothed during a livestreamed performance, *Record Recode* consisted of written text and its gradual redaction across a full wall of the Dyson Gallery at the Royal College of Art.[395] Across the center of the wall Montserrat drew a timeline from 1981-1988 (figure 38). Above and below the timeline Montserrat wrote in idiosyncratic block letters words and phrases associated with that time in her

[394] Montserrat, Webb-Ellis, and Webb-Ellis, Interview with author.
[395] Montserrat: "I use the term unclothed…[This choice] relates to the Transatlantic slave trade and cloth. Nudity can be thought of as innocent and also sexualized." Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.

life, including the names of her nursery, primary, and boarding schools in Yorkshire, and childhood materials such as playdough. Interspersed amongst these are visceral memories such as “mum with black eye”, “peeing in Peggy’s shoes,” “squirrel traps in woods” and “defecating in woods and cleaning up with ferns.” Between these larger anchoring words, Montserrat preceded to write train of thought sentences related to the larger words, in a smaller cursive script. These sentences dove into memories of relationships with friends, classmates, teachers, and family members. The texts speak to feelings of alienation, confusion, and isolation.

The layering of the different texts brings to the forefront an abjectness present in both childhood and rural life—two states of being that are often idealized from a distance. Montserrat, through the unruly material of charcoal, lays out her own experience of this messiness, paying particular attention to moments of violence, places of gendered and racialized power dynamics, and ways in which bodies were disciplined. There are several textual references to squirrel traps and a smaller allusion to her stepfather’s organized pheasant shoot. These situate Montserrat’s childhood—a time of physical and emotional vulnerability—within a simmering violence enacted against both her mother (the black eye) and nonhuman animals. As I discussed with *Cage*, Montserrat felt threatened and trapped in this cultural milieu seeing the violence that took place. Drawing attention to this as an adult, she points to the destructiveness and violence possible from a perspective of domination and hierarchy.

Figure 38 Jade Montserrat, *Record Recode*, 2017, performance drawing installation at Dyson Gallery, RCA. Photo by Ollie Harrop. Courtesy of the artist.

The timeline covers Montserrat's early life from her birth until her first surname change to that of her stepfather, Joe Longstaff. As cited above, Montserrat considered this name change in 1988 as a marking of ownership and rejected it as an adult. In addition to Montserrat's birth, the start date of 1981 was the year of the British Nationality Act and several uprisings by Black communities including in Handsworth, Brixton, and Liverpool. In Brown's words: "The single year 1981, then, witnessed not only Black people's rebellion against their exclusion from the national community but also an unprecedented codification of that exclusion."[396] Montserrat's childhood took place within this political context, but in a predominantly white rural

[396] Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 63.

area where the counterclaims of Black communities were unlikely to be visible. Montserrat's body absorbed the politics, even as she was not yet aware of it. As she put it in an interview, "I was racialized before I knew what race was."[397] The mural situates Montserrat's own contestations over her place within the social body, within this national political context.

Figure 39 Jade Montserrat, *Record Recode*, 2017, performance drawing installation at Dyson Gallery, RCA. Photo by Ollie Harrop. Courtesy of the artist.

Montserrat's drawing as performance was an act of controlled vulnerability. Once the wall was full of text, Montserrat preceded to use more charcoal to gradually obliterate and hide the words within, redacting the vulnerability she had revealed. Heightening this vulnerability, for the entire performance, Montserrat was unclothed.

[397] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.

In this choice, Montserrat enters a long history of artists asserting and highlighting their gendered and/or racialized embodied experiences.[398] In the documentation of this performance, Montserrat looks deep in concentration as she first reveals and then conceals her childhood and inner emotional world. In one particularly uncomfortable image, two older white men, fully dressed, sit and talk, as the young, unclothed, brown-skinned woman works alongside them (figure 39). It is hard to ascertain the men's comfort from their expressions—they seem to be avoiding looking at Montserrat. In orchestrating and allowing for that kind of moment, Montserrat created a palimpsest of gendered and racialized power dynamics, speaking to her past and present situations. Montserrat says of her choice to go without clothing during her drawing performances:

> I'm interested in how there is a strength in the body through being unclothed. And there's also a vulnerability. I'm also asking the audience to act as protection. I'm implicating the audience in the vulnerability… I feel as vulnerable clothed as unclothed. Nakedness is destabilizing for other people. There's nothing intimate about it; I feel it's quite matter of fact.[399]

In allowing her body to be publicly revealed, Montserrat brings the audience inescapably into relationship with her. Like *Cage*, her performance of vulnerability draws attention to her actually experienced vulnerability—as a child with hunters in the woods, as a racialized girl in the English school system, as a Black woman in the predominantly white UK artworld. Unlike *Cage*, the live performance means that Montserrat's physical and emotional vulnerability are read in relationship to those in

[398] I am thinking here of a genealogy that includes Caroline Schneeman, Yoko Ono, Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Laura Aguilar, Tracey Rose, and more recently Cassils and Carlos Martiel.
[399] Montserrat, interview, September 27, 2019.

the space. The piece demands neither that the viewer look at her or look away, but she forces an acknowledgement of co-implication on the part of the viewers present for the performance: to view the artwork is to be aware of Montserrat's vulnerability and to become aware of one's own physical proximity and momentary relationship to her. Once in the space, a viewer cannot opt out of the dynamic.

Figure 40 Jade Montserrat, *Record Recode*, 2017, performance drawing installation at Dyson Gallery, RCA. Photo by Ollie Harrop

The materiality of the charcoal also draws the viewer into relationship with Montserrat and her environment, reflecting her material entanglement with the landscapes she works within. She uses handmade charcoal crafted by a former neighbor out of willow and birch gathered in North Yorkshire. She states:

> The use of this locally sourced charcoal serves to further implicate the word within the land I have a direct relationship to. The work I make from this position understands that the body is a material connected to the ground, the landscape, inevitably sculptural.[400]

Through the act of drawing with charcoal, Montserrat is physically connected to trees growing close to the land she grew up on. The materiality of this charcoal grounds and locates Montserrat and she suggests that it draws her body into relation as a part of the material of making. As the wall of the Dyson Gallery becomes covered in charcoal, a thick layer of dust also builds up on Montserrat's hands and feet and smudges collect on her face, buttocks, and shoulders. As with her intermingling with the peat and the clay in the earlier videos, here her body, the wall, and the charcoal are informing, effecting, and marking each other. Even once the performance ended and Montserrat herself was no longer present, the wall continued to weep charcoal onto the floor and potentially onto visitors in the space, continually changing and eroding (figure 40). This is a drawing of Montserrat's experiences, without the assurance of distance or easy consumption for its audience.

The tactility and color of the charcoal also has a thematic and conceptual link to the perception of Blackness. Montserrat speaks of charcoal drawings as a point of contagion and explicitly connects it to the racial idea of Blackness:

> What the charcoal does is implicate everyone in that blackness… In a perverse way I like the thought of people being troubled with the material. I like that you might be unaware that when you're washing your hands, you're taking the blackness off. One can ignore that quite easily and it might make no impact but for some people it might be the germ of the conversation with which they'll say, "Isn't that annoying? It's dirty to me, I'm dirty, my clothes are covered in this." I like that because you can't escape, you can't shed that skin, you're viewed as almost contagious just bringing up racism or decolonization. [401]

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[400] Montserrat, "Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project," 53.
[401] Jade Montserrat, "Drawing as Contagion," in *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2020), 165, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119194583.ch8.

Montserrat's words allude to the fact that many white people in the UK do not have to engage issues of race and racism when they choose not to and can disengage from conversations around colonial history or ongoing white supremacy. A person of African or Asian heritage in the same society has more difficulty ignoring these discourses. By deploying the loose charcoal materials of the drawing as a form of conceptual and environmental contamination, the artist powerfully redirects the racist rhetoric of cultural pollution.

Montserrat's use of the charcoal made in Yorkshire also opens into other conversations about place and material in the UK:

> Drawing, so far up to periods of 10-hours on gallery walls with charcoal, material darkness, my body covered in the dirt of the work of it, further calls to mind: the north of England's coal mining and cotton mill heritage; class dynamics implied by women workers and rural working; the labor that generates and is required by creative practice, by drawing on the links between industrial capitalism and a neo-liberal capitalist art economy as well as intergenerational transnational and inter-species solidarity movements."[402]

This quote again re-affirms the place-based nature of Montserrat's practice. Montserrat draws here on connections between northern UK geographies and the industries of coal mining and textile production to make meaning of her physical labor. When not naked for these performances, Montserrat dresses in a white cotton dress, further emphasizing these materialities of place and situating herself within the North. In this quote, Montserrat also makes the connection between these industrial forms of labor and her own embodied labor as an artist. Thinking back to the imagined distinction between "practical and contemplative" experiences of landscape

[402] Montserrat, "Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project," 63–64.

cited in the introduction to this chapter, Montserrat attempts to visibly and conceptually link those experiences through her use of the charcoal. She is also pointing to the place-based stereotypes of "the North's abject working classness," while firmly asserting her own place as a skilled creative practitioner and productive laborer.[403] Looking at the mural in London with this reference to coal and class in mind, and thinking of the charcoal coming off surreptitiously on visitors to the gallery in the capital city, the piece smudges the lines of class, race, and place. As the image spills onto gallery visitors, each is brought into relationship with her and the trees of North Yorkshire. It is an expansive landscape of racialized, classed, and gendered relationships from which the viewer cannot put themselves at a distance.

By the end the piece was a thoroughly blackened wall, with only a few clusters of uneven stars left unredacted (figure 41). The social landscape of Montserrat's childhood conjured through the words and charcoal is now a starry night sky, a dense velvety blackness. Her mark-making creates a surface that has the textured, organic feeling of the surfaces she engages with in those videos. The charcoal is more densely applied below the timeline, so it now resembles a horizon line, and the areas of density below could be a field of grasses at night, with a pond reflecting stars in the sky above, or a view out towards the ocean.[404] Written over and through her current rootedness in Yorkshire, I read the charcoal landscape as both a representation of those landscapes where she claims a right to roam, but as a

[403] Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*, 17.
[404] Views of the North Sea from Scarborough, North Yorkshire feature in Montserrat and Webb-Ellis' film *Chronicle.ai*, 2020.

memorial looking out across the middle passage and towards the Caribbean; towards the island of Montserrat, and the ancestors that her name puts her into relationship with. It is an English landscape, no longer steeped in whiteness or used as an alibi for imperial amnesia.

Figure 41 Jade Montserrat, *Record Recode*, 2017, performance drawing installation at Dyson Gallery, RCA. Photo by Ollie Harrop

Conclusion

Exploring the possibilities of homemaking under duress, Jasmine Syedullah, engaging with the work of prison abolitionist Liz Samuels, writes:

> Homemaking is a necessarily alchemic process of transformation. Transforming distraction into discipline, chaos into care, harm into healing, alienation into accountability, pathology into possibility is an ongoing practice of improvising reality.[405]

In each of the pieces discussed above, Montserrat transforms the alienations and struggles of her early life into a place of healing and home. In the introduction to this chapter, I placed Montserrat's work in relationship to the tradition of landscape painting in the UK. I made this comparison because, as with the painters of the eighteenth century, Montserrat is part of a group of artists at the beginning of the twenty-first century who are responding to the contemporary ideologies of land and the societies shifting relationships to it, through producing landscapes and because landscape painters have played a substantial role in the way England is imagined and represented. Throughout, I have highlighted ways in which Montserrat's work references and represents the geographies of North Yorkshire and ways in which her work evokes and challenges modes of thinking about race in the UK in general and England in particular. In doing this I have aimed to demonstrate the way that Montserrat is negotiating the construction of race in and through relationship to place, using but reworking existing discourses to locate herself and claim her belongingness in the UK while challenging exclusionary and nationalist definitions of the landscape.

I have argued that she uses the very discourses of Englishness, especially those built on place and geography, to critique, claim, and reroute them. But in doing this, does she reaffirm nationalist logics? Ian Baucom, writing on Paul Gilroy's response to the uprisings of 1981 writes: "Whatever local knowledges the riots

[405] Jasmine Syedullah, "No Place Like Home: Practicing Freedom in the Loopholes of Captivity," in *Paths to Prison: On the Architectures of Carcerality*, ed. Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2020), 461.

defend, how does this defense of the local, and the locale, differ from the nostalgic celebrations of the local, and the locale, that I have suggested are central to the culture of British imperialism?"[406] The same question could be asked of Montserrat's works discussed here. However, Montserrat's representations foreground but do not romanticize the local, because she exposes the abject and violent aspects of the land as well as the wondrous. Additionally, Montserrat's depictions of place are porous and situational, based in shifting collaborations and relationships, rather than static and exclusionary.

Montserrat's welcoming and open-ended orientation towards place have practical as well as conceptual applications. To end I want to point to one example: a drawing and gardening workshop that Montserrat hosted for sanctuary seekers in Leeds as part of a residency with East Street Arts in 2020. Montserrat invited people to the workshop with small creative kits, that included compost, seed packets for herbs, charcoal, and sketch books. The packets ended up in the hands of sanctuary seekers from India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and the UK who all attended an online drawing workshop with Montserrat. Montserrat states that the packets were "delivered to the community as an act of creativity, care and love."[407] This was a mode of welcoming these new arrivals to the area, drawing them into relationship with the local ecology through gardening and use of the charcoal. She invited them to

[406] Baucom, *Out of Place*, 200.
[407] Alessandra Cianetti, Xavier de Sousa, and Helen Moore, "RE: Seeding, In Correspondence by Jade Montserrat: An Interview with Helen Moore," *Counterpoint Arts* (blog), October 14, 2020, https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/an-interview-with-helen-moore-east-street-arts/.

get to know their new place and as such, become part of it, to dwell "on this earth of mankind not as a stranger or a trespasser, which is the way capitalism wishes us to relate to the spaces we occupy, but as home."[408] She offers sanctuary on and through the soil, conscripting it as her ally in welcoming newcomers and reimagining the land currently known as England.

[408] Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2018), 77.

4. Plotting for Abolition: The Relational Pathways of Solitary Gardens

In the previous chapter, I concluded by looking at Jade Montserrat's workshops for asylum seekers in the UK, in which she offered seeds to grow herbs and locally made charcoal. I argued that through offering her knowledge and connection to the materiality of Yorkshire, she welcomed the newcomers and continued her work of decoupling the materiality of rural English landscapes from racist and exclusionary narratives, opening up possibilities of belonging beyond the nation state. In this chapter, I am further investigating relationships built through the growing of herbs, flowers, and other plants in jackie sumell's *Solitary Garden* project. In this participatory art project, sumell has built multiple gardens the size and shape of a solitary confinement cell and works with people who are currently incarcerated in solitary confinement to design the content of these gardens which are then planted by volunteers.[409] Here, I focus primarily on the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, installed on the university campus in 2019. Solitary confinement is a mode of punishment and control enacted through isolation and sensory deprivation. I argue that through making those in solitary confinement visible, building relationships across the prison walls, and emphasizing the necessary interdependence of living

[409] Solitary confinement goes by many names including restrictive housing, secured housing unit or SHU, administrative segregation, the hole, etc. In this text I will use solitary confinement unless citing a source that uses an alternative term.

forms, the *Solitary Gardens* are a place of rupture within the carceral landscapes of the United States.

This chapter contributes to the larger argument of the dissertation by looking at how imaginings of land and of cultivating plants have been produced alongside forms of racialized unfreedom in the United States. It considers prisons first as a tool that facilitates the disappearance of unwanted populations, clearing the land initially for European settlement, and second, as one of the many afterlives of chattel slavery, generating profits from forms of racialized labor and captivity. If prisons continue logics of the plantation society, *Solitary Gardens* are spaces for dreaming of liberation.

Over the last two decades sumell's work has been exhibited widely in the United States and she has received several high profile and prestigious awards including from the Rauschenberg Foundation and the Joan Mitchel Foundation. This chapter is one of the first extended academic engagements with sumell's work and the only study that places her work within landscape and gardening discourses. When exhibited in group exhibitions or included in exhibition catalogs, sumell's work is primarily discussed in relationship to other work critical of prisons and policing in the United States. Notably, Nicole Fleetwood includes sumell's *The House that Herman Built* (2008) in *Marking Time*, her wide-ranging study of art addressing incarceration in the United States.[410]

[410] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 222–24.

This chapter draws on exhibition reviews and published interviews with the artist and several collaborators, as well as sumell's own published writings and letters. Because the artwork is an example of what Grant Kester calls "dialogic" and "collaborative" art and Claire Bishop refers to as "participatory" art, I have also conducted extensive interviews with participants.[411] As Bishop alludes to in her study, participatory projects are often more compelling from the inside as much of the potency of the experience is not easily transmitted through documentation.[412] In addition, collaborative artworks enable processes of "learning and un-learning via practice," and these processes are slow.[413] In a participatory project that stretches over years and involves many different people, there will be a wide range of experiences and perspectives. To better understand this range, I have reached out to sumell, former solitary gardener Warren Palmer, several UC Santa Cruz organizers and participants, and current gardeners Timothy James Young and Shanda Crain (for a full list of interviews, see the Appendix). I am also a participant observer in this chapter, having facilitated the installation and planting of sumell's *Solitary Garden* at UC Santa Cruz. I have been in conversation with our collaborator Timothy Young since August of 2019, so at the time of writing, he and I have been in conversation for 18 months. Given this intimacy with the project, my own experiences unavoidably

[411] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011).
[412] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 245, 256.
[413] Kester, *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 226.

inform my perspective. This project has also been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I consider Young, Palmer, and Crain as co-authors of the particular gardens they designed, along with the volunteers who worked those gardens. The gardens exist through collective authorship, rejecting a modernist notion of individual artistic genius. As such, it would be inappropriate to focus on sumell as the single architect of the project and sumell herself speaks of the project as a product of friendships and relationships, even as she narrates the work through an individual lens that makes the work legible to arts museums and granting institutions.

Garden as Plot and Counterplot

Artists in the United States and Europe have been producing gardens as a form of creative practice at least since the 1970s, using them as a tool towards social and environmental ends. For example, in 1974 artist Bonnie Sherk established *Crossroads Community*, building a "barn, theater, the Crossroads Café, roof garden, vegetable rows, and fruit orchards" on a lot underneath a San Francisco freeway.[414] The project "attempted to create an alternative vision of an ecologically sensitive and meaningful relationship between human, animal, and plant life in an urban setting."[415] Vito Acconci's *Metrotech Gardens* (1996) covered an empty lot in Brooklyn that was located between two enclosed private gardens with a "horizontal plane of

[414] Jana Blankenship, "The Farm by The Freeway," in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, ed. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, New Edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 45.
[415] Blankenship, 53.

landscape"—a maze of chain-link fence elevated four feet above the ground and covered in ivy.[416] In doing so he used the physical material of private enclosure to build a public space for rest and to sit amongst greenery. More recent examples include Jeremy Deller's *Speak to the Earth and It Will Tell You* (2007-2017) in which Deller asked members of the Klein Gardens allotment association in Münster, Germany to keep garden diaries for ten years, and Fritz-Haeg's *Edible Estates (2005-2013)* in which Haeg partnered with private homeowners primarily in Los Angeles to grew gardens of herbs and plants in their front yards. Lastly, in several projects including *Resilience Garden* (2018) built in partnership with an elementary school in Liverpool, UK, Mohamed Bourouissa unearths Franz Fanon's practice of gardening with patients when Fanon worked as a psychiatrist in Blida, Algeria. In all these examples the garden-as-artwork expands the audience for contemporary art beyond the walls of a gallery or museum and is intended as a place for building and watching a community of humans and plants unfold over time.

Creating a garden is not an inherently liberatory practice. Landscaped gardens were a purview of the wealthy in eighteenth century England, entwined with enclosure of the commons and colonial transplantation.[417] The picturesque genre of landscape representation normalized and aestheticized these relationships to the land and the power structures that supported them.[418] For example, Caribbean plantations

[416] James M. Clark, ed., *Public Art Fund's Urban Paradise: Gardens in the City.* (New York: Public Art Fund, 1994), 23.
[417] Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*; Casid, *Sowing Empire*.
[418] One important difference between the landscape gardens of the aristocracy and the other garden examples is that the aristocracy would not, in general, have worked their gardens themselves and thus

themselves were represented by proslavery Europeans as bountiful or Edenic gardens and farms, "a site of nature improved, as peaceful and productive cultivation."[419] The images produced in support of this ideology obscured or romanticized the labor and living conditions of those enslaved on the plantations.

Within these plantation landscapes, the enslaved also cultivated small plots of food to feed themselves and their families. These subsistence plots often included produce brought to the Americas from West Africa, including yams, plantains, rice, and okra.[420] Though these gardens served as a cost-saving tool for plantation owners, they also functioned as what Jill Casid, informed by Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, calls a form of counter colonial landscape: spaces where enslaved people enacted a "transformative appropriation of the very ground of the plantation system."[421] In her influential article *Novel and History, Plot and Plantation*, the scholar Sylvia Wynter uses the garden plots farmed by enslaved communities in the plantation societies of the Caribbean as the basis for defining two opposing forces and sets of values. The plantation society, she states, was driven by market forces and founded upon the domination of Man over Nature, but "since Man is a part of Nature, a process of dehumanization and alienation was set in train."[422] In contrast, the

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developed some of the intimate and observant relationships with the plants that I am arguing exist in the *Solitary Gardens*.

[419] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 28.

[420] Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, *In the Shadow of Slavery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

[421] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 195; Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1994), 401–9.

[422] Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 99.

society of the plot or provision grounds of the enslaved was founded around the growing of food for survival and provided a thriving space for cultural practices brought across the middle passage. In these spaces "the land remained the Earth."[423] From within the plot, Wynter argues, grew "cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system."[424] Former solitary gardener Warren Palmer made a similar distinction to Wynter's between the interaction with plants and crops he was offered in prison—a brutal system of agriculture he likened to purgatory—and the horticultural and healing knowledge he wanted to cultivate through gardening.[425] Expanding open Wynter's argument, Katherine McKittrick writes:

> The plot illustrates a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spacializes what would be considered impossible under slavery: the actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize the deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence.[426]

McKittrick goes on to argue that Wynter's plot-and-plantation thesis provides "a new analytic ground" which "envisions not a purely oppositional narrative but rather a future where a corelated human species perspective is honored."[427] It is this analytic of the plot that I take up throughout this chapter, arguing that *Solitary Garden* offers a space within the carceral landscape where the logics of isolation, individuation, and criminality are reordered.

Incarceration, Race, and Land in the US

[423] Wynter, 99.
[424] Wynter, 100.
[425] Warren Palmer, interview by Alexandra Moore, Phone, April 17, 2021.
[426] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 10.
[427] McKittrick, 11.

Historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez argues that, starting with the incarceration and forced labor of the various Indigenous peoples living in what is today the U.S., incarceration is a central pillar of U.S. settler colonialism.[428] Expanding on Lytle Hernandez' argument, Douglas Miller argues that the prison system is a part of a strategy of settler custodialism in which different forms of incarceration, paternalism and surveillance of indigenous peoples have been used from the 1800s through to the present.[429] As Lytle Hernandez states: "Mass incarceration is mass elimination."[430] In other words, prisons facilitated, and continue to facilitate, settler control of the land. Lytle Hernandez demonstrates that the logic of elimination by criminalization extends beyond native populations and that captivity has been used as a tool for eliminating multiple populations over time, including poor whites, Chinese and Mexican immigrants, and, after the Civil War, Black Americans.

In many respects, the prison system is an extension of the plantation, part of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the afterlife of slavery.[431] As many scholars and activists have noted, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."[432] This

[428] Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[429] Douglas K. Miller, "The Spider's Web: Mass Incarceration and Settler Custodialism in Indian Country," in *Caging Borders and Carceral States*, by Douglas K. Miller (University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 385–408, https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469651231.003.0014.
[430] Hernandez, *City of Inmates*, 1.
[431] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.
[432] For example Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 31; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New

enabled the continued use of incarcerated people for unpaid or exceptionally low paid labor. One particularly stark example of this continuity is the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Also known as "Angola" and "The Farm," the Louisiana State Penitentiary sits on land from several former cotton and sugarcane plantations and men incarcerated at Angola work the same plantation fields. Former solitary gardener Warren Palmer was incarcerated at Angola, where he worked the fields:

> I've picked cotton, tomatoes, okra. All at 4 cents an hour. It's a crossover from slavery…In the fields, you are out there with 50 other men. Armed guards watching you pick cotton. Its literally 95-to-100-degree weather. It's scary, like a purgatory…Every day the same…You are literally stepping back into the nineteenth century. It's hard to explain.[433]

Beyond prison labor, in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis traces multiple strands of anti-black racism in the United States—slavery, the convict lease system and the Black Codes, lynching, and segregation—to argue that "the prison reveals congealed forms of antiblack racism that operate in clandestine ways."[434] In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander argues that the scale and demographics of incarceration today constitute a new racial caste system, akin to the forms of segregation and oppression under Jim Crow laws.[435] Today, the U.S. prison system is not only enmeshed with racism and capitalism, generating profits from what Davis calls "processes of social destruction," but also contributes to increased consumption of fossil fuels and thus to

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York: Seven Stories, 2003), 28. Ava Duvernay's 2016 documentary film *13th* brought this topic to a mainstream audience.

[433] Palmer, interview.

[434] Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 25.

[435] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 2.

the process of climate devastation.[436] David Pellow argues that prisons are vital sites in the struggle for environmental justice because they are "frequently built adjacent to or even on top of toxic waste sites, are inundated with air and/or water contamination, and are sources of hazardous waste generation."[437]

Solitary confinement is a particularly brutal cog within this system of power and destruction and emerged as a technology of punishment in the United States alongside the use of incarceration more generally. Previous to this (as documented by Foucault and others) punishment for crimes were forms of physical and emotional abuse such as corporal and capital punishment, conducted primarily in public to both shame the culprit and deter onlookers.[438] Incarceration was imagined by many reformists as a more humane approach. One of the early advocates of solitary confinement was Benjamin Rush, "a prominent physician, psychiatrist, essayist, educator, abolitionist, and signatory of the Declaration of Independence."[439] He conceived of individuals "governed by reliable mechanisms of self-discipline, emotional restraint, and industrious habits of work, study, and prayer" and solitary confinement as a mode to instill these mechanisms into the recalcitrant body.[440]

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[436] Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 88; Julius Alexander McGee, Patrick Trent Greiner, and Carl Appleton, "Locked into Emissions: How Mass Incarceration Contributes to Climate Change," *Social Currents*, November 25, 2020, 232949652097400, https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496520974006.
[437] David N. Pellow, "Struggles for Environmental Justice in US Prisons and Jails," *Antipode* 53, no. 1 (2021): 57, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12569.
[438] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt4cggj8.
[439] Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 5.
[440] Lisa Guenther, 6.

Within the worldview of Rush and many of his contemporaries, criminality was a disease or personality defect that would be eliminated through solitude and silence.

An early iteration of a solitary confinement cell in the United States was proposed by Thomas Jefferson in his designs for a prison in Cumberland County, Virginia (though actually built in Nelson County Virginia in 1823). He wrote in his notes: "A solitary cell is proposed to put ill-behaved [sic] prisoners into occasionally, as a punishment."[441] The cell included a bucket to be used as a toilet and a small stove. The solitary cell was situated in the back of the prison between cells designated for confinement of prisoners sorted by binary categories of race (Black and white) and gender (men and women). As Mabel O. Wilson notes, "With taxonomic precision, the architect labeled the cells according to crime, gender, and race."[442] She goes on to state: "Jefferson had designed a racialized apparatus of modern incarceration, a typology of captivity and violence that has continued to evolve through the twenty-first century."[443]

Established in 1829, the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania was the first prison in the United States to institute solitary confinement as its primary mode of penitence and rehabilitation. And by 1843, solitary confinement was

[441] Thomas Jefferson, "Miscellaneous Buildings: Prison (Plan), Verso, Undated, by Thomas Jefferson. N488 [Electronic Edition]," accessed May 24, 2021, http://masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/doc?id=arch_N488verso&mode=lgImg.
[442] Mabel O. Wilson, "Design of the Self and the Racial Other," in *Paths to Prison: On the Architectures of Carcerality*, ed. Isabelle Kirkham-Lewitt (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2020), 398.
[443] Wilson, 405.

disproportionately used against Black Americans in Eastern State Penitentiary.[444] Despite the fact that total isolation had been discredited as a method of rehabilitation and was even condemned in 1890 by the US Supreme Court for rendering inmates "violently insane,"[445] the practice remerged in the U.S. in the 1960s as a response to organizing and protests by incarcerated populations and began to be used with greater frequency in the 1980s and 1990s as the overall prison population expanded. In 1989 the first supermax prison opened at Pelican Bay, California. In these facilities all those incarcerated are in some form of solitary confinement. No longer imagined as a place of penitence and self-reflection, solitary confinement is used as a mode of punishment and control.

Since the increase in solitary capacity in the 1990s, the average length of time spent in solitary confinement has increased, particularly for young Black men.[446] Average length of stay and racial disparities in solitary confinement, vary by state, but in general Black and Latinx inmates are overrepresented in solitary.[447] People are put in solitary for rule infractions, because they are seen as a risk to the general population, or because they themselves are seen as at risk. These last two categories include people who are mentally ill, juveniles in adult facilities, gender

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[444] David H. Cloud et al., "Public Health and Solitary Confinement in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 1 (January 2015): 18–26, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302205.
[445] Medley, No. 134 U.S. 160 (US Supreme Court March 3, 1890).
[446] Ryan T. Sakoda and Jessica T. Simes, "Solitary Confinement and the U.S. Prison Boom," *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 32, no. 1 (February 2021): 66–102, https://doi.org/10.1177/0887403419895315.
[447] Bebeto Matthews/Associated Press, "Who's in Solitary Confinement?," The Marshall Project, November 30, 2016, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/11/30/a-new-report-gives-the-most-detailed-breakdown-yet-of-how-isolation-is-used-in-u-s-prisons.

nonconforming and queer people, people with suspected or known gang affiliations, political activists, and pregnant women. Nicole Fleetwood states: "The incapacitation of these groups through isolation is one of the technologies that prisons implement to regulate gender, race, religion, and political affiliation in general prison populations; it exemplifies the use of administrative categories as part of the punishment regime of the carceral state."[448]

In 2011, the UN stated that solitary confinement should be banned as a form of punishment because it amounts to torture and is "contrary to rehabilitation," the supposed goal of incarceration. There isn't clear data on exactly how many people are currently in solitary confinement in the U.S. but a 2020 Yale snapshot report estimated that between 55,000 and 62,500 people were in restrictive housing in the summer of 2019.[449] Often, neither a judge nor a jury is involved when someone is put in solitary confinement—it is a practice at the discretion of prison guards and wardens and largely invisible to the public.

Almost two decades ago, Angela Davis' asked, "Why do we take prison for granted?"[450] To answer that question, Davis argued, we first have to attend to the fact that prisons are both present and absent in our lives.[451] They are present because imprisonment and police are fundamental functions of the settler colonial state, paid for by U.S. citizens' tax dollars, but they are also absent because those who have not

[448] Fleetwood, *Marking Time*, 195.
[449] Correctional Leaders Association, "Time-In-Cell 2019: A Snapshot of Restrictive Housing" (Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School, September 14, 2020).
[450] Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 15.
[451] Davis, 15.

been directly affected by the systems can avoid the "fear of thinking about what happens inside them."[452] Artist Ashley Hunt's series *Degrees of Visibility* (2013-ongoing) powerfully communicates this tension between the ubiquity and invisibility of U.S. prisons. In this series, Hunt photographs prisons, jails, and detention centers in the United States from a publicly accessible point. The resulting photographs fall into two broad categories: remote locations where the prison is barely visible or urban and suburban locations in which the site of incarceration is camouflaged to blend in with its surroundings. Hunt labels each image with the name and location of the facility and the number of men, women, or children incarcerated within. In Hunt's words: "The more that prisons and jails are used as the solution to every kind of social problem that our society doesn't want to deal with, the more we see a desire to erase that from view."[453] To imagine the U.S. landscape without prisons, their presence and power must be made clear. *Solitary Gardens* facilitate this practice of seeing the prison system, while also using gardening to build relationships of reciprocity that counter the prison's hegemony (figure 42).

[452] Davis, 15.
[453] Ashley Hunt, Barring Freedom Interviews, interview by Alexandra Moore, July 29, 2020.

Figure 42 jackie sumell & Tim Young, *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, 2019-ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, and the artists.

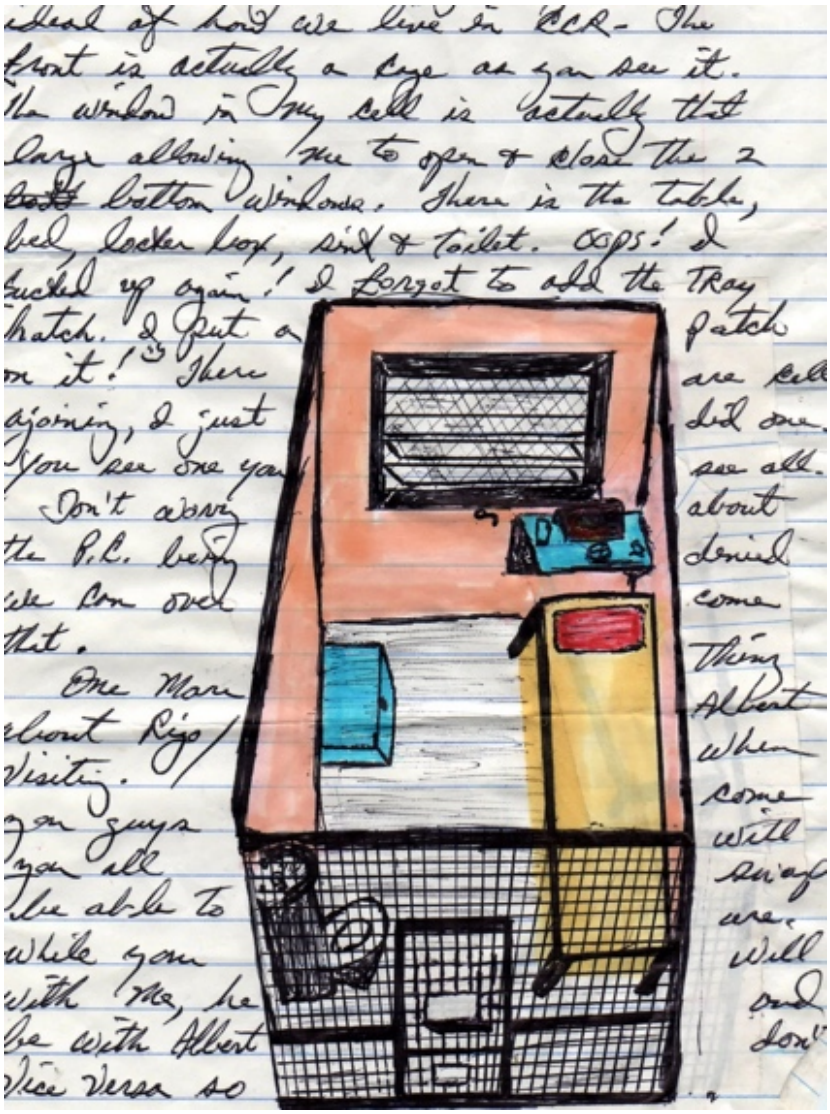

Figure 43 Letter from Herman Wallace to jackie sumell. Image courtesy of jackie sumell.

The *Solitary Gardens* Project

The six-foot by nine-foot design of each *Solitary Garden* bed is based upon a drawing by Herman Wallace of his solitary cell in the Louisiana State Penitentiary (figure 43). Herman Wallace is one of three Black men, known as The Angola Three, who starting in the 1970s were held for decades in solitary confinement as retaliation for

their involvement with the Black Panther Party and activism within the prison. In 2003, sumell wrote to Wallace and asked, "What kind of house does a man who has lived in a 6'x9′ box for over thirty years dream of?" With that question they began a friendship and collaboration that persisted for the years that Wallace remained in solitary. Together they produced an extensive project called *The House that Herman Built* (2008) which includes plans for Wallace's dream home. After Wallace's exoneration, release, and passing in 2013, sumell again turned to his letters and realized that the gardens had been the first part of the house that he envisioned. He wrote: "The gardens are the easiest for me to imagine, and I can see they would be certain to be full of gardenias, carnations and tulips."[454] This seeded the creation of *Solitary Gardens*.

Sumell submitted an application to the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority "Growing Green" initiative and received the lease to two adjacent lots on Andry Street in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans.[455] On this plot, sumell built a row of nine gardens in the shape of Wallace's cell, to mirror the row of cell blocks in Angola where Wallace had been incarcerated. Each of those gardens is tended by several volunteers, collaborating with someone in solitary somewhere in the United States—current gardeners are in several states, including Texas, Louisiana, California, and Colorado. Those tending the beds on Andry Street include community members,

[454] jackie sumell, "About Solitary Gardens," Solitary Gardens, accessed June 2, 2021, https://solitarygardens.org/about.
[455] jackie sumell, Phone interview with jackie sumell, interview by Alexandra Moore, March 3, 2021.

family members of the incarcerated, people who have had been incarcerated themselves, and people who work in the District Attorney's office in New Orleans. In each partnership, sumell provides both the solitary gardener and their collaborators with gardening books on whatever topics are of interest so that the partners are learning together. Sumell has also partnered with universities, arts spaces, and advocacy groups around the US, including building gardens in Philadelphia in partnership with Peoples' Paper Coop and The Village of Arts & Humanities, at Harriet Beacher Stowe House in Houston, with Sidewalk Ends Farm in Providence (figure 44), and on the roof of the Lower East Side Girls Club in Manhattan.

Figure 44 jackie sumell, *Solitary Garden* bed, before planting, at Sidewalk Ends Farm, Providence Rhode Island. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The beds for these *Solitary Gardens* were made using a material that sumell calls revolutionary mortar. This is a mixture of the four most common crops grown and harvested by enslaved populations in the American South: cotton, indigo, tobacco, and sugar cane. Artist and Xavier University professor Ron Bechet stated: "With this project [Xavier students] are seeing the connection and seeing what the materials of cotton, indigo, and sugar mean to us, particularly as Black people. Understanding what this stuff really looks like and feels like—the tangible evidence of it."[456] Here Bechet speaks to a form of knowledge transmitted through touching and working with the cash crops of chattel slavery. Artist Sonya Clark, who works with cotton and indigo as well as human hair in her sculptures states: "I think that materials that human beings have been working with for a long time have this distinct ability to absorb our histories and also reflect them back at us."[457] The revolutionary mortar creates a physical relationship to the history of chattel slavery that also enlists these materials now as co-conspirators in the creation of a different future.

The beds made from the revolutionary mortar are poured into a rudimentary footprint of a cell, creating the outer garden walls and the shapes of a toilet, bed, and desk. The space in between these representations of cell furniture is available for planting and growing. Using organic materials to create the shape of the cell/garden bed means that over time, the garden structures crumble back into the ground, visually enacting a breakdown of the rigid walls of solitary confinement. As sumell

[456] *Abolishing Prisons One Garden at a Time* (A Blade of Grass & RAVA Films, 2017), https://abladeofgrass.org/fieldworks/fieldworks-jackie-sumell/.
[457] Sonya Clark, Barring Freedom Interviews, interview by Alexandra Moore, 2020.

describes it: “Written in is the possibility of transformation and change.”[458] This transformation has already occurred with some of the older beds. For example, at The Village of Arts & Humanities “once that garden bed started to crumble, they tossed the soil back into the earth.”[459] One of the most prolific gardeners to date, Warren Palmer, has transformed the shape of one of the beds at Andry Street into the shape of a caduceus—two snakes entwined around a staff, a form associated both with the Greek god Hermes and with healing and the medical profession. After the revolutionary mortar falls apart, the metal gate is left standing. The organizations can choose whether to reuse the metal gate for a new garden at a new site (as they did at Project Row House) or keep the metal gate in place as a form of memorial (as happened at the reclaimed youth prison in North Carolina).

The structure of the prison actively hides incarcerated people from view. The physical structure of tall concrete walls, chain link fences, as well as the physical distance from families and communities, contributes to the process of marking those incarcerated as “other.” Like the system of enslavement which attempted to render Black lives fungible, the prison system attempts to erase the subjectivity of the incarcerated, moving people out of sight and referring to them by a number: every envelope addressed to UC Santa Cruz gardener Timothy Young must refer to him as F23374. The gardens counter this by bringing people disappeared into the system back into sight while also exposing the workings of the system itself. sumell describes

[458] sumell, Phone interview with jackie sumell.
[459] sumell.

the gardens as portraits of their gardeners: "The Solitary Gardens in a lot of ways become portraits of those who are buried furthest within our carceral institutions. Those that we are told to most forget are brought to the surface and brought to public arenas."[460] Different gardens reflect the personalities and interests of the solitary gardener: Warren Palmer's gardens foreground his interest in healing, Timothy Young's portrays him as a storyteller and teacher.

While bringing the gardeners into the public arena, these gardens-as-portraits represent the solitary gardeners in a mode that starkly differs from dominant pop culture or news media representations, particularly arrest photos. Through mugshots and prison ID photos photography has had a central role in creating ideas and images of criminality and incarcerated people. Fleetwood states that "these photographs are representations of carceral visuality, the state's power to mark and isolate certain people as lawmakers, criminals, and prisoners."[461] Several nonincarcerated artists have entered prisons to make photographs that attempt to counter these narratives. Deborah Luster's *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (1998-2002) is a series of portraits made in collaboration with incarcerated individuals. In some images the subjects wear costumes or are depicted "with beloved possessions, posing in ways that challenge the very system that defines them as confined subjects."[462] Many of the photographs have a sense of intimacy or whimsy. However, as Shawn Michelle Smith points out, the series "proposes that visibility humanizes" but "seeing does not

[460] *Abolishing Prisons One Garden at a Time*.
[461] Fleetwood, *Marking Time*, 87.
[462] Fleetwood, 101.

necessarily translate into recognition."[463] In the case of *Solitary Gardens*, because the gardens are not photographic portraits but reflections of the gardeners' interests, they escape the potential traps of photography such as reifying stereotypes or rendering the gardeners as objects to be visually consumed. Through the gardens, the solitary gardeners are highlighted as creative leaders and contributors to their communities. And importantly, the gardens build relationality in addition to visibility.

UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden

Figure 45 jackie sumell & Tim Young, *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, 2019-ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, and the artists.

[463] Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2020), 76.

The *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* takes a different form from many of the other gardens. Instead of the revolutionary mortar, *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* is an aluminum structure based on a drawing of Herman Wallace's cell (figure 45). The garden grows around the outside of this metal form. Unlike those gardens made with the revolutionary mortar, this solitary cell will not fade away over time but will stand for years on this piece of highly valuable real estate until it is actively removed. When Santiago Alvarez, a UC Santa Cruz alumnus, prison abolition activist, and contributor to the Plant Book described the impact of visiting the garden, he emphasized the stark juxtaposition between the beautiful view of the Monterey Bay and the steel bars of the cell. Alvarez also stated:

> I have never been to prison or through the prison system and yet there are people in my community who have, so seeing the cell was really emotional for me…I think everything became so much more real…because it was always such an abstract thing for me, someone being incarcerated, even though so much of my time and energy is dedicated to prison abolition.[464]

The space of the metal sculpture at the center of our Solitary Garden is carved up into blocks that stand in for the furniture found within a typical cell: a bed, a sink and toilet, and desk with stool. The sculpture makes tangible the form of a cell, enabling visitors to feel their bodies in relationship to the scale of the furniture and giving those who have not been incarcerated an embodied reference for the experience. Young said in one of his early letters that his cell is like a coffin. The simple metal renderings of the cell furniture in the sculpture recall a form of stone memorial or tomb (figure 46). This captures what Lisa Guenther, building on Orlando Patterson's

[464] Santiago Alvarez, interview by Alexandra Moore, June 14, 2021.

work on the official severance of the kinship relationships of the enslaved, calls the social death of solitary confinement. Guenther writes that the socially dead "are persons whose social significance has been crossed out, as if they were *no longer with us*."[465] The metal sculpture within the UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden signals this form of social death, while the garden growing around it is a testament to a resilient refusal of that position (figure 47).

Figure 46 jackie sumell & Tim Young, *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, 2019-ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, and the artists.

[465] Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, xxiii–xxiv.

Figure 47 jackie sumell & Tim Young, UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden, 2019-ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, and the artists.

Our collaborator on this project is Timothy James Young, a man who has been on California's Death Row since 2006. Young has consistently claimed his innocence since his arrest in 1999 and is seeking to overturn his conviction through the appellate court system. He is currently housed in solitary confinement in San Quentin Penitentiary where he lives in a cell that is four and a half feet wide by ten feet long for a minimum of 23 hours a day. When he does leave the cell, it is primarily to go to a concrete enclosed area.

San Quentin holds the majority of the 750 individuals currently sentenced to death in California. The UC Santa Cruz is the first Solitary Garden in California and in conversation, sumell described her own shock at the brutality of San Quentin. She said:

> When I visited San Quentin for the first time, I was shocked…Of course Louisiana and Mississippi, we're going to be all kinds of messed up, right? But California, y'all are going to be different you know? And then, I visited Tim and I was like, oh this…is universally messed up. I think having young folk who are in school, who are in college, who want to learn more also be confronted by that reality that they're living in the golden state…there's a whole lot of work that can happen there.[466]

Sitting in the grounds of UC Santa Cruz, the garden brings attention to the golden state's violent practices of incarceration and capital punishment.

Young's first letter to us determined the orientation of the garden—he wanted the bars of the cell to face the ocean view, with roses in front, imagining this area as his veranda, and wanting to add to the overall beauty of the scene he could picture through the bars (figure 48). At the back of the cell, he placed a small pathway so that visitors would be encouraged to enter the metal structure and feel the size of the cell with their bodies. And all around the outside he wanted to plant a ring of vegetables surrounded by sugarcane. The vegetables would provide sustenance: in contrast to the processed and unappetizing food available to him inside, Young was interested in growing a variety of leafy greens, potatoes, onions, and garlic. Requests for potatoes and pumpkins reflected Young's childhood foods and an intention to plant honeysuckle was a nod back to his adolescence in Washington State.

[466] jackie sumell, Barring Freedom Interviews, interview by Alexandra Moore, December 7, 2020.

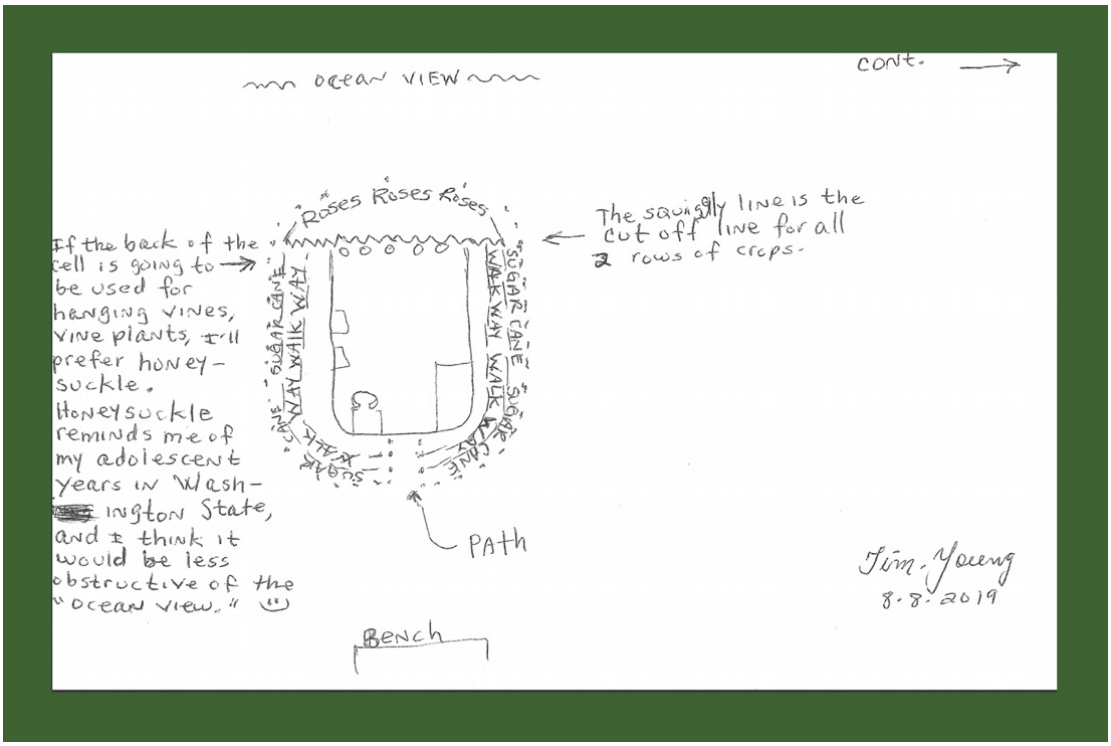

Figure 48 Excerpt from Timothy Young's garden plan. Image courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz.

In his choice of the sugar cane to surround his *Solitary Garden*, Young drew attention to the connection between incarceration and slavery just as sumell has done with the revolutionary mortar she designed. But Young also saw planting sugarcane as a reference to the stolen moments of freedom enslaved people would find after dark or out of sight of the overseer. He said:

> The same sugar cane that they died cultivating, are the same sugar cane fields that they were forced to use for privacy, for intimacy, and even refuge…Just as with the slaves, in prison there is no privacy, not when you sleep, not when you use the bathroom, not when you shower, not even at visits. So, for me, the sugar cane represents more than just a sweetener or a commodity, it represents PRIVACY![467]

Evoking the practices of enslaved people taking refuge in the tall stalks of sugar cane, Tim communicates one of the exhausting and demeaning elements of incarceration—

[467] Timothy Young, "First Letter with Garden Plans," August 8, 2019.

the constant surveillance. He wanted the barrier of sugar cane to shield the interior of the garden to give him this sense of privacy. He also said in his letters that this barrier would slowly reveal the sustenance and vibrance within to a visitor. This he hoped would teach people not to trust the surfaces—of people, of institutions—but to try and look beyond what is made readily accessible. In the case of our prison system, he wanted people to see the humanity, his humanity, that has been kept out of sight. To fulfill Young's vision, sumell sent us 12 cuttings of sugarcane from her gardens in New Orleans, but because we were unsure if sugar cane would successfully grow in central California, we also planted bamboo--a tall, leafy plant we felt more likely to grow and that could provide the sense of refuge.

Over the summer months the herbs flourished, the beets, onions, and garlic grew well enough, but many of the flowers were munched upon by deer. Then, with the devastating wildfires of September 2020 when the air became thick with ash and campus was evacuated, several of the plants died. In the fall, Young, in conversation with various members of the UC Santa Cruz team, decided to let the ground rest and re-envision the garden for the second year. Per Young's wishes, Rachel Nelson and Chloe Murr winterized the garden, spreading a mixture of seeds and hay over the soil to protect and enrich it for the new year.

In his second growing season, Young transitioned the garden to herbs with healing qualities, continuing the garden as a site for nurturing. This was in part thanks to a correspondence course Young took over 2020 with the Samara Herb School in New Orleans. Continuing the idea of a barrier, Young replaced the sugar cane and

bamboo with stinging nettles—a plant which will hopefully deter deer but can be used for healing inflammation and high blood pressure. In addition to nettle, Young chose to plant mugwort, bergamot, lemon balm and dudleya. About the mugwort, he writes:

> It helps with joint pain, headaches, skin irritations, and has many healing properties. I especially like it because it helps to promote peaceful and healthy sleep. I suffer from a sleep disorder…and couple with the noise, clamor, and chaos of prison—I find that a good night's sleep is hard to come by. I also find that my sleep disorder has worsened and intensified since having contracted COVID-19 in June of 2020. I have been denied medication and treatment for my sleep disorder, but I would like to think that if I had access to mugwort that some of my problems would be alleviated.[468]

He ended by noting that it should be planted alongside the bed in the cell so that a visitor would know to associate it with sleep. Young's request for mugwort offers him the imagination of a future in which he can brew himself some mugwort and improve his sleep condition. Additionally, through the mugwort, he communicates information about his experience in San Quentin, including his exposure to Covid-19 and his lack of access to adequate medical care.[469]

Lawyer and Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative Bryan Stevenson speaks frequently of proximity between different groups as a route to social justice. Artist and writer Emile DeWeaver spoke of Stevenson's impact upon him while he was incarcerated. He stated:

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[468] Timothy Young, "New Year's Planting," January 31, 2021, https://ias.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/file_attachments/Spring%20Garden%20Update.pdf.

[469] In his letters from March 2020 through February 2021 Young shared details about the experience of the Coronavirus pandemic inside San Quentin. On March 26th a prison guard tested positive for COVID-19. Without masks, hand sanitizer, or other protection measures, Young and other incarcerated people were left vulnerable to exposure from guards, many of whom were not wearing masks. Young contracted COVID and was sick for much of summer 2020, experiencing the exhaustion and "brain fog" of long COVID.

> Bryan Stevenson came to San Quentin to give a talk once and he was talking about proximity. The way he was talking about it was mind blowing…And that got me to thinking, how do I go about building proximity with a population who's been taught all their life to be afraid of me?[470]

Letter writing through the Solitary Garden offers Young a mode of proximity to public audiences—in addition to putting many of his letters online we partnered with San José Museum of Art to have a specially written letter by Young mailed to each of the museum's members as well as to museum visitors who opted in. In this letter, Young introduced himself, spoke about his experiences in solitary confinement and with COVID, bringing his voice and the view from his cell directly into the homes of museum visitors. Some of these recipients chose to write back to Young, building new relationships. Young writes:

> It's not just that every time I get a letter, I can sometimes forget that I spend the bulk of my existence (sometimes 24 hours a day) alone in a cell so small I cannot stretch out my arms. It's not just that a letter breaks up the monotony of my days spent surrounded by concrete and bars. It's not just that when I get a letter, I know that someone sees me as more than the identification number I have been given by the state. It's also that I know every letter I get is a small triumph against a system that has tried to make me and the other 2.3 million people in U.S. prisons and jails invisible.[471]

As part of the UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden, different members of the university community organized several projects and events with Young. In April 2021, Young participated in an online conversation with jackie sumell and Albert Woodfox, another member of the Angola 3 and friend of Herman Wallace. Throughout the conversation Young's voice was faint and hard to decipher, and every ten minutes he

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[470] Emile DeWeaver, Barring Freedom Interviews, interview by Alexandra Moore, 2020, https://barringfreedom.org/artists/prison-renaissance/.
[471] Timothy Young, "Mail Call!," *FREE TIM YOUNG* (blog), December 16, 2020, https://timothyjamesyoung.com/2020/12/16/mail-call-by-tim-young/.

was interrupted by the prison system's recorded message. Participating in the conversation was a significant risk for Young. Chloe Murr, one of the project organizers, said of the event: "The prison doesn't want that. They were tampering with his volume on purpose to stop him from being heard."[472] Murr went on to say: "I have so much to learn from that kind of person, someone who says: I am going to be heard and speak truth to power."[473]

Since its installation in 2019, a community has grown around the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*. Louise Leong, Chloe Murr, and Zaarin Mizan, working with Young, organized a series of zoom workshops called *Revolutionary Greetings* where supporters gathered to write letters, hear updates from Young, and discuss ideas. Community members have also begun different forms of collaboration with Young. For example: Jocelyn Anleu-Lopez worked with Young on a Spotify playlist that in their words investigates and resists the criminalization of Blackness; Golnoush Pak has made animated videos that illustrate Young's poems; and Sharon Daniel is working with Young on a digital art piece that exposes the experiences of the COVID pandemic for incarcerated people. Because we could not physically gather for a planting in spring 2021, various community members organized a zine, *Solitary Garden Plant Book*, which gathers together some of Young's writings as well as visual art and poetry by supporters.

[472] Chloe Murr, Conversation with Pathways Fellow Chloe Murr, interview by Alexandra Moore, May 28, 2021.
[473] Murr.

Figure 49 jackie sumell & Tim Young, *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, 2019-ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, and the artists

The *Solitary Garden* community is what Miwon Kwon refers to as an invented community: "one in which a community group or organization is newly constituted and rendered operational through the coordination of the art work itself."[474] As Kwon notes in her analysis of several projects from the 1993 exhibition *Culture in Action: New Public Art* in Chicago, the success of such projects often relies upon the resources of the curators or organizing entity and "have severely limited life spans…without the exhibition, their continuation becomes untenable in

[474] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 126.

most cases."[475] Whether the community that has formed around the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* will sustain itself beyond the life of the sculpture's installation is a question for future art historians. But longevity is not necessarily a measure of success.

That participants or viewers of an artwork will develop a political consciousness or find solidarity is a potential effect of not only social practice projects, but other forms of art in the public sphere. In my conversation with Marisa Cornejo, one of the contributors to the zine, she compared the *Solitary Garden* project to *Les Jardins des Disparu* in Geneva, founded in 2000, which serves as a memorial for people who were disappeared by various political regimes. In working together on creating those gardens, Cornejo described that the survivors began talking to each other about shared struggles and frustrations and from this grew a movement to lobby the UN for the needs of their community. Similarly, at the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, while conversations initially focused solely on planting the garden, they have expanded to include the response to COVID-19 in San Quentin and Young's struggles to get his conviction overturned. Several participants are now in touch with Young's court-appointed lawyer, advocating for his case to be reopened. Not all the participants shared the same initial perspectives on prisons and policing but gardening together and being in conversation with Young provided a space for discussions about the cruelty of solitary confinement and incarceration in general, the structural racism of policing in the United States, and ways to reimagine justice. One participant noted

[475] Kwon, 130.

that taking her mother to *Solitary Garden* was a way to start political conversations from a place of their shared interests in gardening: "My mum is not one to get involved with political conversations, but she loves gardening… while I lived on campus for a quarter we would go to the garden and she would talk about watering it and get engaged [in the issues]."[476] Speaking of both the Solitary Garden and the gardens in Geneva, Cornejo said: "All of these works that come from the affective, then go to the social, and then can really transform legal situations."[477]

I started this section by referencing the stark difference between the cell and its garden surroundings. The seeming out-of-placeness of the confining cell against UC Santa Cruz's expansive ocean vista invites reflection upon the relationship between the land, the university, and the prison. Like the prison system, the university is a pillar of the U.S. settler colonial structure. The University of California was established with funds raised via the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone succinctly explain that "the Morrill Act worked by turning land expropriated from tribal nations into seed money for higher education."[478] The Land-Grab Universities (LGU) project, of which Lee and Ahtone are a part, meticulously tracks and maps the process of dispossession, illuminating the scale of the land stolen and the wealth accumulated in fifty-two different university endowments across the

[476] From participant interview.
[477] Marisa Cornejo, interview by Alexandra Moore, June 3, 2021.
[478] Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, "Land-Grab Universities," *High Country News*, March 30, 2020, https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities.

U.S.[479] Reflecting on the revelations of the LGU, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee) and Amanda R. Tachine (Diné) write:

> Much of the myth of these universities has relied and continues to rely on myths, erasure, and violence…the conditions that make it possible for land-grant universities to exist begin with the violent separation (effectively the erasure) of Indigenous peoples from their lands, a process whose essence is a spiritual and ontological attack."[480]

Considering these foundations, the authors of "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation" argue that education itself was an instrument of imperialism.

> Settlers' arrogation to themselves of the right to accumulate and govern Native lands was inseparable from their expression of the right to educate Native children. Education, in this way, was both a concrete expression of the accumulation imperative and a means of imperial disavowal by rewriting violence as a project of amelioration and uplift.[481]

They continue their critique of the university and the assumption of its "a priori goodness" into the present, arguing that the university, like the prison, currently functions as a mode of wealth accumulation.[482] They state: "The university's appearance of necessity is no mere mirage but rather the effect of its centrality within settler colonial and racial capitalist regimes of accumulation."[483]

These criticisms of the U.S. university system and the University of California in particular raise the question: Is the garden complicit with the university or a site of "abolitionist world-making" within it?[484] Is this a subversive intellectual and artistic project or a mode of critique that merely affirms the necessity of the public university? In a poem about the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, Alvarez wrote:

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[479] Robert Lee, Tristan Ahtone, and Margaret Pierce, "Land-Grab Universities," High Country News, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.landgrabu.org/.
[480] Brayboy and Tachine, "Myths, Erasure, and Violence," 139.
[481] Abigail Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation," *Abolition Journal*, August 28, 2019, 17, https://abolitionjournal.org/abolitionist-university-studies-an-invitation/.
[482] Boggs et al., 3.
[483] Boggs et al., 3.
[484] Boggs et al., 25.

"Practicing abolition against the very system it exists in."[485] My conversations with Young and with campus participants lead me to agree with Alvarez and argue that this is a site of rupture smuggled into the university. By building a community around abolition, it opens the possibility of further activism.

Growing Relationships

Many participatory or social practice art projects aim to reimagine relationships and treat social life as the medium of their aesthetic intervention—an approach that Okwui Enwezor refers to as "the production of social space as artwork."[486] Artists have done this through the sharing of meals in projects such as Carol Goodden, Tina Girouard and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food* (1971) and Rikrit Tirivanija's *Pad Thai* (1990); via community radio as in the *Bessengue City Project* (2002-2006) by artists Jesús Palomino, R. E. Hartando, James Beckett, and Goddy Leye; through book fairs like Public Doors & Window's *Shine a Light* (2014); and teaching workshops such as long term projects by Huit Facettes, Tania Bruguera, or Machine Project. [487] Within this genealogy of works aiming to create and explore forms of social interaction,

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[485] Santiago Alvarez, "Freedom for All Political Prisoners," in *Solitary Garden Plant Book*, ed. Timothy Young and Louise Leong, 2021, 24.
[486] Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[487] Elvira Dyangani Ose, "Enthusiasm: Collectiveness, Politics, and Aesthetics," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2014, no. 34 (Spring 2014): 24–33, https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-2415159; Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork"; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*; Mark Allen, Rachel Seligman, and Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (Live by Special Request)* (Saratoga Springs, New York: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2017).

Solitary Gardens provides connection and relationship to people in solitary confinement—people who are being punished by the state through extreme control and limitation of their relationships.

The serious negative effects of solitary confinement on mental health are well documented. Across time and geographies, across disciplines and methodologies, a set of symptoms of psychological distress reoccur, including sleeplessness, anxiety, panic, rage, paranoia, violent fantasies, hallucinations, mood swings, and suicidal thoughts.[488] Though abuse by guards and other traumatic factors contribute to these forms of distress, their primary source is the experience of social and environmental isolation. Forms of physical and social connection to others is a vital mode of survival. Young says: "Visits are not only humanizing, but they help mitigate the effects of solitary confinement…with each visit I receive, I am made more whole."[489]

Sumell says that prison abolition begins with eye contact. She states: "eye contact is this ability to literally and figuratively see each other…to recognize and acknowledge the complexity of each other so that we don't let the rights cancel out the wrongs or the wrongs cancel out the rights."[490] This perspective foregrounds a shared humanity between people and disrupts what Dylan Rodríguez calls "the circuit of criminalization-decriminalization": a social structure which normalizes the

[488] Craig Haney, "The Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement: A Systematic Critique," *Crime and Justice* 47, no. 1 (January 2018): 372, https://doi.org/10.1086/696041.
[489] Timothy Young, April 30, 2020.
[490] sumell, Barring Freedom Interviews.

incarceration of some populations and the freedom of others.[491] In Rodríguez' words, criminalization is "the discursive and legal formulation of 'crime' as an affixation of notions of pathology/antisociality to particular (gendered, sexualized, racialized) human acts, behaviors, ecologies, and bodies."[492] The *Solitary Garden* doesn't necessarily build literal eye contact between volunteers and solitary gardeners (though sumell hopes that some volunteers will physically visit their incarcerated collaborators and tries to pair people in such a way that this is geographically feasible) but builds connections of care, trust, and reciprocity through the processes of letter writing and gardening.

Artist Ai Weiwei initiated a related project as part of his exhibition *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* in 2014. Titled *Yours Truly* (2014) and developed in partnership with Amnesty International, the piece invited exhibition visitors to send a pre-addressed postcard to one or more of 116 prisoners of conscience featured in the exhibition. Weiwei was responding to Alcatraz' history as a silent prison from 1934 to 1937: "During this time, inmates were punished if they were found speaking with one another. In response they invested ingenious ways to make contact, whispering to one another through the empty pipes and leaving notes in library books."[493] Over the course of the exhibition visitors wrote and sent 92,829 postcards to the selected

[491] Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (April 2019): 1586.
[492] Rodríguez, 1586.
[493] Cheryl Haines, "You Are Not Forgotten: The Story of Yours Truly," in *Ai Weiwei, Yours Truly: Art, Human Rights, and the Power of Writing a Letter*, ed. David Spalding, Illustrated edition (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2018), 33.

prisoners. Speaking from personal experience, Weiwei states: "To someone jailed or living in exile, a postcard can be essential communication."[494] The importance of raising awareness of the isolation of incarceration and creating connections for incarcerated people are shared concerns of Weiwei and sumell's interventions. However, the pre-addressed postcards in *Yours Truly* didn't provide intentional space for exhibition visitors to provide a return address, suggesting that the messages were meant as one time, one-directional gestures. In contrast, sumell's project intentionally fosters the potential for more substantial and reciprocal bonds.

Young writes: "The way I see it, letters lead to friendship. Friendship leads to solidarity. And solidarity leads to support. It may not always happen in that exact order, but the theory that I have developed is that 'friendship is the pathway to freedom!'"[495] Albert Woodfox, another of the Angola 3 echoes Young: "Friendship was foundational, not only with Robert and Herman but it was the friendship that I developed with members of the coalition of Free the Angola 3 that gave me the strength to keep going."[496] Building relationships through the *Solitary Garden* requires work and attention. As Claire Bishop has argued, participatory art is not "a privileged political medium" and is not inherently democratic or liberatory.[497] The structure, tone, and goal of the participation matters. For Bishop, participatory art can

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[494] Ai Weiwei, "Artist's Note," in *Ai Weiwei, Yours Truly: Art, Human Rights, and the Power of Writing a Letter*, ed. David Spalding, Illustrated edition (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2018), 37.
[495] Young, "Mail Call!"
[496] jackie sumell, Timothy Young, and Albert Woodfox, Incarceration from the Inside Out, April 13, 2021, https://barringfreedom.org/exhibitions/visualizing-abolition.html.
[497] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 284.

too easily be co-opted by neo-liberal calls for "social inclusion" and entrepreneurial creativity that elide structural inequalities.[498] She is also critical of "participatory art, in which an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice."[499] Bishop argues that, "the most striking, moving, and memorable forms of participation are produced when artists act upon a gnawing social curiosity without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt."[500] However, in sumell's practice the interpersonal—the vulnerability and reciprocity of eye contact—is a key route to social justice. Unlike Bishop, Grant Kester identifies long-term commitment and trust building as important factors that influence the success (and ethics) of projects based in dialogue and collaboration.[501] In setting up new *Solitary Garden* partnerships, sumell asks volunteers and organizations who are starting a garden to commit to two years or three growing seasons. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that gardening and relationship building are slow work and that the goals of the project cannot be accomplished in one afternoon of planting.

Making friends with someone requires seeing them as fully human. In a collection of published conversations, sociologist Avery Gordon and artist Céline Condorelli discuss the politics of friendship. Together they parse the distinction between several different forms of friendship, including the important distinction between friendships of "a certain kind of old boys' club, of male homosociality" that

[498] Bishop, 13–18.
[499] Bishop, 25.
[500] Bishop, 39.
[501] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 175; Kester, *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 94.

"characterizes the intimate circles of power" and friendships of the marginalized or excluded.[502] Thinking with examples such as the suffragettes, workers' organizations, pirates, and maroons, they consider the possibility for friendships as a foundation to a non-hierarchical mode of operating:

> Friends help each other out, and in doing so also make common cause. Friendship is essential to understanding these cooperative relations and at the same time inseparable from taking sides in the issues at stake, so that they are all forms of personal and political friendships…perhaps that means they can provide real models of resistance to a system."[503]

The friendships that Gordon and Condorelli describe are those of people in non-hierarchical relationships. They differentiate between friendships, relations built around a situation of shared intimacy and/or common cause, and friendliness which they define as a "situational kindness."[504] People on the outside who write to an incarcerated person they do not know once or twice are likely enacting a form of friendliness. This can be a meaningful political gesture if it offers connection and respect, but it does not necessarily breakdown any of the divisions created by the prison. However, sumell's orchestration of a two-year, physical commitment in which participants move their body and hands to enact someone else's wishes, moves the relationships formed beyond simple friendliness and towards something more intimate and reciprocal.

Several people commented to me on the impact of seeing Young's letters, some of which are displayed on a sign by the garden and many more of which are

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[502] Avery F. Gordon and Céline Condorelli, "Utopian | Friendship | Working Together," in *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 104.
[503] Gordon and Condorelli, 84–85.
[504] Gordon and Condorelli, 111.

publicly archived online. Seeing Young's looping cursive script, often on yellow legal pad paper, carries a trace of his physical presence out of the solitary cell. The practice of letter writing, no longer a primary mode of communication for those who are not incarcerated, is slow and intimate. Jocelyn Anleu-Lopez shared:

> It's a very personal medium of exchanging…You get lost in the thoughts so there's more that is said. And I write with pen, so you don't really get to go back and change how it is once you started the thought. It's like, well I'm three sentences in now and you kind of just have to leave it. That's part of it too: making choices like that and being ok with the mistakes in it…it also most captures the nuances of what it would be like to talk in person.[505]

As Anleu-Lopez notes, composing a personal letter, rather than an email or series of texts, invites a space of interior reflection. And unlike an electronic correspondence, a handwritten letter does capture a type of slow immediacy and closeness—you can see half thoughts crossed out, see the energy or fatigue in the handwriting. This combination of the slow thoughtfulness of writing and the physical presence of the writer when receiving a letter make it an effective tool for relationship building.

In her study on art and incarceration, Nicole Fleetwood uses "fraught imaginaries" to discuss the variety of "collaborations between nonincarcerated professional artists, nonprofit arts organizations, and incarcerated artists, students and participants."[506] Her use of the term points to "the possibilities and challenges of collective dreaming and art-making by people who are differently situated across carceral geographies."[507] Fleetwood discusses at length and with nuance several different examples of arts collaborations, unpacking the tensions between the

[505] Jocelyn Anleu-Lopez, interview by Alexandra Moore, June 3, 2021.
[506] Fleetwood, *Marking Time*, 158.
[507] Fleetwood, 158.

revolutionary intentions of some artists (incarcerated and nonincarcerated) and the use of the arts by prison administrators to "manage prisoners," as well as pointing to the potentially vast power differential between paid, nonincarcerated professionals who are often white women and unpaid, incarcerated artists or participants who are often nonwhite men.[508] Her writing warns against arts programming that idealizes the liberatory and rehabilitative potential of art making without taking into account the carceral landscape in which the art is made, circulated, and consumed. She ends her chapter on collaborations by asking: "Can prison arts collaborations go beyond personal growth and transformation to foster movement building?"[509]

Unlike many of the programs that Fleetwood discusses, sumell is not funded by or affiliated with any correctional institutions. Solitary Gardens has been funded by grants from external arts organizations such as the Art for Justice Fund, Creative Capital, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Additionally, the project does not rely upon an idea of creativity as inherently revolutionary or redemptive but upon the centrality of connection and compassion as step towards ending the practice of solitary confinement in particular and incarceration in general. The intention of the project is to produce a landscape without prisons and Young has taken the opportunity provided by the introduction to the UC Santa Cruz community to foster every possible avenue for movement building.

[508] Fleetwood, 167.
[509] Fleetwood, 189.

The structure of the Solitary Gardens relationships puts the creative agency in the hands of those in solitary, while the volunteers on the outside work to fulfill the designer's vision and wishes. In interviews, several of the UC Santa Cruz participants emphasized that Young is the driving force behind much of what is taking place not just in the garden, but also in the events that have been planned around it, such as the letter writing workshops. Chloe Murr noted: "I have so much to learn [from Tim]. In the last couple of months, I have been so in awe of the community that's been built…Yeah we have been doing stuff, but it really is Tim. We only have material because Tim is giving us material. He is the person that is creating everything and building everything."[510] Interviewees also reminded me that organizing against the prison system started with those who are incarcerated and emphasized the importance of centering their perspectives. Santiago Alvarez emphasized: "The folks who are inside really are the leaders of the movement; they are the ones who are experiencing the conditions most directly and they are the ones who have the answers."[511]

Repeatedly, people spoke of feeling lucky to be part of this project. For some this was to be learning from and with Young, for others it was to have his emotional support and friendship. Murr stated: "I just feel very lucky to be another person saying, "I see you" when the whole system is built to not allow people to do that."[512] For several people, myself included, the garden and the correspondence with Young were a particularly important connection during the pandemic. Louise Leong shared:

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[510] Murr, Conversation with Pathways Fellow Chloe Murr.
[511] Alvarez, interview.
[512] Murr, Conversation with Pathways Fellow Chloe Murr.

"Being part of the garden has helped me heal in some way through this year; so I'm really grateful to Tim for the time and energy he puts into it." She continued:

> The people who are incarcerated still have much to offer. I think that us experiencing that, integrates that understanding which goes against what we are told: that people are expendable and that the people who are locked up are locked up because they are not contributing to the greater society—which is obviously not true.[513]

Marisa Cornejo, an artist based in Geneva who found out about Young and Solitary Gardens through Instagram, submitted a painting to the *Solitary Garden Plant Book* which depicts Young above a purple plot of land, from which grow people, their heads like seeds embedded in the earth, their bodies wrapped in plants (figure 50). Cornejo based the painting on a dream she had:

> I could see him inside his cell, dressed like a person in prison, and we were very few of us being like seeds, we were all trying to grow with heads towards the earth and feet towards the sky...And it was a privilege to be one of these plants growing around [Young], I was almost like protected. Maybe through poetry, through words, through spiritual health.[514]

In this painting, and her description of it, Cornejo depicts the community that has grown around Young and her experiences of flourishing and growth through the relationship.[515] Both Leong and Cornejo draw attention to how much Young is doing for those he is in community with.

[513] Louise Leong, Interview at Solitary Garden, interview by Alexandra Moore, June 4, 2021.
[514] Cornejo, interview.
[515] Cornejo's use of her dreams for material is reminiscent of the surrealist movement.

Figure 50 Marisa Cornejo, *Free Tim Young*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

All the organizers and participants I spoke with consider Young a friend or collaborator and Young has communicated in multiple ways that he considers these relationships important and fulfilling. He wrote in the plant zine: "The connections and the bonds that I have made through the Solitary Garden project have been invaluable. And the reason that I am still healthy enough to render these words is

because of the love and support I received during the pandemic."[516] However, there is a clear power imbalance between Young and those he is collaborating with outside of prison. Leong, Murr, Cornejo and others have intentionally considered their position and the power imbalance. Leong stated: "thinking about it continuously encourages a reciprocity…having an awareness of what we are getting out of this, so then we can be motivated and feel more intentional about the reciprocity."[517] Along these lines, several participants spoke to me of negotiating their own vulnerability in relationship to Young. As already noted, people felt that the medium of handwritten letters invites self-reflection and intimacy. Acknowledging that Young is already in a vulnerable position and making himself available for interpersonal connection and support, several people spoke of navigating their own boundaries as they decided how much of their interior worlds to share in return, ultimately forging tighter bonds with Young through building openness and trust.

The process of letter writing provides a sense of connection, but also exposes the casual brutalities of the prison system. Leong spoke of her experiences sending letters to Young and to another incarcerated pen pal:

> I used to be able to write on whatever paper stock I could, it just couldn't be card stock, but it could be colorful. And then at a certain point it had to be 8.5 x 11paper, white paper in a legal sized envelope so little things like, if I didn't have the materials at home readily available, became a barrier for me communicating with him…I think I put a dried flower and that was immediately considered contraband, but really, what is the harm in showing that someone is thinking of you?[518]

[516] Timothy Young and Louise Leong, eds., *Solitary Garden Plant Book*, 2021, 7.
[517] Leong, Interview at Solitary Garden.
[518] Leong.

The rules around letter writing enforce the sense of constant surveillance and control. Incarceration in general severs people from their communities, attempting to break the bonds of love and interdependence. In Nicole Fleetwood's words: "The existence of Black people on this continent has been one of white people, of the state, of repression, separating us from everyone we love. The prison is so familiar as this site of struggle to stay connected to your loved ones."[519] During the public event, Young and Woodfox spoke candidly of their struggles in solitary, particularly the pain of being separated from loved ones:

> I was not able to mourn the passing of my grandmother because to do so, when you're behind bars, sometimes grieving is a luxury that you don't have or can't afford because you're not necessarily guaranteed to come back from that grief. You have to learn how to shut down, you have to learn how to compartmentalize and almost become desensitized. It's a shame that you have to live that way but in order to maintain your own sanity you have to do that."[520]

Woodfox echoed these sentiments, stating:

> I don't think people realize how inhumane it is when you can't even mourn the loss of one of the most important persons in your life because you know that your very sanity depends on it. You know if you start crying you may never be able to stop.[521]

The inability to participate in the public rituals or even private internal processes of mourning for a loved one is a form of cruelty that will not be erased through letter writing and garden dreaming. But the project asks people who have not been personally impacted by incarceration to look at and confront this avoidable pain and move towards abolishing these practices.

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[519] Nicole R. Fleetwood, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Herman Gray, Visuality and Carceral Formations, November 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FLvkBl4TTM&t=3s.
[520] sumell, Young, and Woodfox, Incarceration from the Inside Out.
[521] sumell, Young, and Woodfox.

Revolutionary Gardening

Sumell's intentions for the *Solitary Gardens* are explicitly abolitionist, with each garden bed asking visitors to "imagine a landscape without prisons." In the previous section, I focused on relationship building as a strategy that undermines the divisions upheld by incarceration, and now I look specifically at what gardens and gardening bring to this politics. Guided by the testimony of participants, I identify gardening as a place of healing the harms of the carceral state, a way of envisioning and learning about revolutionary change, and a practice of nurturing interdependence and liveliness.

Both gardening and friendship building are practices of care and noticing. As I write this, we are in a summer heat wave, and I am aware of the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* needing more active care. When I visit to water the plants that were recently added and are particularly vulnerable, I also take photos of things I notice: hummingbirds feeding in the purple sage flowers; a wild turkey feather; blossoms newly opened. I share these details with Young so that he knows what is happening at the garden and knows I am thinking of him. Jocelyn Anleu-Lopez spoke of the garden as "bringing [Young] in" to the space and saw tending to the garden as an important aspect of centering and caring for him.[522] Poet Kendra Hamilton writes: "A garden can't survive its maker, will die with the one who loved it."[523] In other words, a

[522] Anleu-Lopez, interview.
[523] Kendra Hamilton, "Southern Living," in *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, ed. Camille T. Dungy (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 345.

garden is a manifestation of a relationship between humans and plants; without care and attention, the garden disappears.

As with friendships, the tenor of the human-plant relationship matters. In the case of the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden*, we attempted to grow several plants in the first planting that were neither drought nor deer resistant. One solution would have been to fight the forces of deer and drought through aggressively hunting the deer and installing sprinklers at the garden which would consistently water the garden. However, these would have been entering into a relationship of defiance and unsustainability with the landscape. Instead, Young and his comrades listened to the landscape and recalibrated a garden that would meet Young's vision of refuge, sustenance, and visual beauty in ways that worked in partnership with the existing ecosystem. Young also hoped that his garden would educate people on the value of plants:

> We don't look at plants the same way as previous generations and we don't really understand the healing properties that they have so in planting the new garden that we now have on campus, people can get a window into some of those properties, and it can hopefully be an educational journey when they visit the garden."[524]

Young's hope to educate visitors through the garden acknowledges the prevalence of what James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler termed plant blindness: an inability to notice or appreciate the lives and importance of plant life.[525] According to Wandersee

[524] Timothy Young, Audio Clip, April 15, 2021.
[525] James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, "Preventing Plant Blindness," *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/4450624.

and Schussler, plant blindness leads to the underrepresentation of plants in social and biological analysis at multiple levels. Though the authors of plant blindness attribute the problem to many assumed universal human experiences, I suggest that plant blindness is a corollary of Man's severance from Nature as articulated by Wynter and thus a historically and socially specific affliction. The collective learning undertaken at the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* is a step towards shifting plant blindness for participants.

I asked formerly incarcerated gardener Warren Palmer directly about the connection between prison abolition and gardening:

> AM: Several of the gardeners are Black Panthers. Is gardening revolutionary?[526]
>
> WP: Yes, gardening is definitely revolutionary. It goes against all the boundaries. You can't contain nature. Mother nature will break through a wall, a building. She can be beautiful like sunshine or deadly. It is ever-changing.
>
> AM: How does it point to abolition?
>
> WP: Breaking boundaries. You were locked in a hole. You just got to wait. Like a seed, you got to wait. It's an amazing thing, a seed, but it takes time. You just got to wait. Give it some love and care. One of the best, strongest, longest relationships I've ever had is with nature.

Here Palmer touches on two symbolic relationships between gardening and prison abolition: nature can break down structures and growth takes time. Like Palmer, several of the UC Santa Cruz participants stated that the garden had taught them patience. For Louise Leong, the process of gardening gave her a sense of the long timescale of political change. She stated:

[526] One of the reasons that several of the gardeners are Black Panthers is because inmates with political affiliations and who are activists within the prison are more likely to be in solitary confinement such as CCR in Angola.

> People have been working on prison abolition longer than I've been alive so even if [prisons] don't disappear tomorrow, it doesn't mean that the work we are putting in today doesn't count. So, the relationship with gardening: it takes time and you sow the seeds and you tend to something not necessarily knowing what will come out of it. But that doesn't stop you from starting.

Along related lines, in several letters, Young writes "we grow seeds of infinite possibilities."[527] He returns to the resilience of the plants that are growing despite wildfires, deer, and gophers, and compares these stories of survival to his own hopeful potentials: "If Roses are able to grow through the cracks in concrete (as Tupac delineates) and if they're able to grow on the campus of UC Santa Cruz despite the voracious appetites of the deer, then perhaps, just perhaps, I am able to dig a little deeper, strive a little harder, and be more strengthened in my resolve."[528] For Palmer, Young and Leong, gardening connects to abolition because plants teach patience and model the possibility of radical change.

Gardens are a place for nurturing life. When asked if gardening is revolutionary, Young answered:

> I first and foremost think plants are abolitionist or just revolutionary because if you stop and think about it, plants are what keep us alive…Think of a world where there were no plants. If you imagine a world without plants and flowers and all that, it would be a world that was less inhabitable. I think they protect us; they heal us."[529]

Both Palmer and Young have become invested in the healing potentials of plants to care for themselves and their communities. Noting the lack of nutrients in prison foods and the insufficiency of healthcare in his community, Palmer has studied the plants which would help with common ailments of those around him: gymnema and

[527] Timothy Young, "On the Wildfires," September 27, 2020.
[528] Timothy Young, "May 18 2020," May 18, 2020.
[529] Young, Audio Clip.

saw palmetto for diabetes; passionflower for PTSD; vegetables with folic acid for depression and pregnancy. When we spoke during the COVID-19 pandemic he was thinking about immunity boosting and respiratory tinctures. These possibilities of improving community health through the gardens point to a very tangible form of interdependence between humans and plants. Along similar lines, Louise Leong stated:

> Thinking with Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Prison abolition is not a subtractive process where you just take away the prisons, but it is an additive process in creating life affirming practices and what better symbol of that than growing plants: you are literally growing life, whether to nourish and feed people or animals or the earth.[530]

In these examples the garden is both a place for learning about revolution through metaphor, and an actual space of solace and healing through interaction with the plants themselves and the gifts the plants can provide to a larger community. In the quotes above, Palmer, Young, and Leong all indirectly pointed to a notion of interdependence, with Palmer talking about his long-term relationship to plants and Young and Leong noting that we rely on plants for life.

In her article "Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina" Alexis Pauline Gumbs uses gardening as an extended metaphor within which to talk about ending reliance on police and prisons in her community. She describes the lessons she has learned about working together through the analogies of breaking ground, feeding the soil, watering, weeding, and sharing the harvest.[531]

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[530] Leong, Interview at Solitary Garden.

[531] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina," in *Abolition Now!: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. The CR10 Publications Collective, Illustrated edition (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), 145–55.

Gumbs grounds her article in Sylvia Wynter's articulation of plots (summarized at the beginning of this chapter), and focuses on the fact that the gardens of the enslaved were not growing food for the market, but for direct consumption. This is central to her definition of a garden and vision of justice—a space that is nurturing and productive to those tending it. As she elaborates upon her extended metaphor she turns to the South African concept of Ubuntu, which she defines as "I am because we are." For Gumbs one of the important connections between gardening and abolition is a recognition of the interdependence that sustains life and the compassion and responsibility that flows from this recognition.

Solitary confinement attempts to severe the relationships that bind a person into community, but the damage it causes draws attention to its own flawed logic of individualism. As discussed in the previous section, the experience of solitary confinement has severe mental health consequences. This provokes Lisa Guenther to ask: "Who are we, such that we can become unhinged from ourselves by being separated from others?"[532] She goes on to state:

> It is only because we depend on the world, and on the others who co-constitute both the meaning of the world and our own sense of personhood, that solitary confinement and the sensory deprivation that inevitably accompanies it have the power to damage us at the very level of our being.[533]

Similarly, scholar and filmmaker Bret Story points out the torture of solitary confinement takes place through the method of individuation. She argues that the

[532] Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, xii.
[533] Lisa Guenther, 20.

violent effects of solitary confinement contradict the ontology of modern life which assumes a self-contained and self-determined subject. She writes: "If solitary confinement confirms anything to us, it is that the individuated subject is a broken, even impossible self. Such a self, moreover, stands in remarkable contrast to the ideal of the self-contained and self-determining subject we are, in modern life, expected to become."[534] In other words, the damage of solitary confinement suggests an underlying human interdependence.

The interdependence fostered and acknowledged through processes of thoughtful and sustainable gardening is the antithesis of the forced individuation and isolation experienced in solitary confinement. Acknowledging interdependence undermines the divisions created by the categories of criminal and innocent, between lives deemed valuable and lives normalized as less worthy of care, health, and flourishing. It discourages the demonization of a single bad actor and instead invites analysis of the system that created the context for an individual's choices. One of the arguments of abolitionist activists and scholars is that rather than criminalizing populations and using prisons and policing to solve social issues, society should invest resources in addressing the root cause. In Angela Davis' words, "a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment" could include: "demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparations and reconciliation."[535]

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[534] Brett Story, "Alone inside: Solitary Confinement and the Ontology of the Individual in Modern Life," *Geographica Helvetica* 69, no. 5 (2014): 360, https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-69-355-2014.
[535] Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 107.

These approaches are oriented towards seeing each person as a part of a larger society—as parts of a whole invested in each other's well-being and capacity for growth.

In his writings, Young weaves together images of embodied, affectionate interaction with the environment to express the longing for freedom and physical connection with the worlds beyond his cell. During the time when the East Block of San Quentin was under quarantine because of coronavirus, Young couldn't leave his cell at all. He wrote to say:

> Although I didn't leave my cell physically, I was able to leave it psychologically. I pictured myself at the *Solitary Garden* on the UC Santa Cruz campus. I sat on the bench and I overlooked the garden in solitude. I meditated. I walked around the structure, taking in the panoramic splendor of all the flowers and plants. And then, I did what I've been dreaming of for so long. I squatted down and felt the earth. I picked up the soil and let it sift through my hands. It has been 21 years.[536]

More recently, Tim wrote me to say: "After 22 years of living in a concrete environment, it was a natural transition for me to become an environmentalist…Not only would I hug a tree, but I would gleefully kiss the sky."[537]

People in solitary confinement are not just denied human interactions, but also a view of the sky and the sunset, and interactions with other forms of life. The health benefits of exposure to various natural environments and green spaces are scientifically documented. One 2013 survey study of scientific literature on "nature deficit disorder" concludes: "The scientific literature on dosage suggests that nature

[536] Timothy Young, March 15, 2020.
[537] Timothy Young, Email Interview, May 11, 2021.

helps in every form, and in every dose."[538] Along the same lines, during the Coronavirus pandemic, public health experts called for continued or increased access to green space to be part of policy considerations for shelter-in-place because: "Nature contact offers a means to proactively confront the emotional and physical health consequences corollary to social isolation and physical inactivity that COVID-19 has exposed."[539] These studies support the testimony of Young and others on the detrimental effects of being deprived contact with nonhuman life and green spaces and the nourishing, grounding importance of touching the soil. In this way, solitary confinement is an extreme form of the dehumanization and alienation that Wynter identified as resulting from Man's separation from Nature. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the prison system of the United States developed as a tool of the settler colonial state and replicates plantation logics of anti-Blackness, bodily control, capitalist exploitation, and environmental degradation. Embedded within these histories of the prison is the racist valuation of some lives over others. The desires expressed by Young and Palmer for joyful, nourishing, and sustainable relationships with plants point towards different possibilities; foregrounding respect and interdependence is one step in envisioning a more just world.

Conclusion

[538] Frances E. "Ming" Kuo, "Nature-Deficit Disorder: Evidence, Dosage, and Treatment," *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 5, no. 2 (July 1, 2013): 176, https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2013.793520.
[539] Linda Powers Tomasso et al., "The Relationship between Nature Deprivation and Individual Wellbeing across Urban Gradients under COVID-19," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 4 (February 2021): 1511, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041511.

The bars and cell of the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* stand in stark contrast to the majestic live oak trees and ocean view that surround it. Visually, the cell disrupts an easy consumption of the view, reminding the viewer of those who cannot look out towards the horizon—those like Timothy Young who are incarcerated on the picturesque peninsula of Marin County just ten miles from Muir Woods National Monument, but cannot see the redwoods or the ocean. In addition to being a visual disruption, I have argued here that the garden is a conceptual disruption of the carceral state of the United States, growing relationships that point towards the abolition of solitary confinement in particular and challenge the logics of carceral power more broadly. The connection and care, the collective learning, and the tending of plants for nutrition and healing taking place through the *UC Santa Cruz Solitary Garden* all work against the values of the prison system. Where the prison system relies on categories of criminal and innocent, caged and free, the garden fosters a shared sense of connection and purpose, building community across the prison walls. This community is a space within which conversations start, learning happens, and advocacy and political organizing can take place.

The *Solitary Gardens*, including the one at UC Santa Cruz, are a structure for sowing and tending relationships that are interdependent and reciprocal, with an orientation towards abundant life. Like Timothy Young and Warren Palmer, other incarcerated gardeners have chosen to grow plants that can heal and nourish their

communities.[540] Informed by this, sumell has begun working with incarcerated gardeners and volunteers to design and craft tinctures, teas, and salves from the plants grown at the gardens in New Orleans. Sumell calls this iteration of the project the *Prisoner's Apothecary* (2019-ongoing) and distributes the remedies to communities that are most impacted by incarceration. In this way, the apothecary moves outside the frames of punishment and criminality and instead points to restoration, healing, and connection. To paraphrase Young, the gardens grow seeds of infinite possibilities.[541]

[540] Roshan Abraham, "A Prisoner's Apothecary: Solitary Gardens Reimagines Six-by-Nine Cells," *Scalawag*, June 30, 2021, http://scalawagmagazine.org/2021/06/solitary-gardens/.
[541] Young, "On the Wildfires," September 27, 2020.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have analyzed works by Otobong Nkanga, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Jade Montserrat, and jackie sumell that act at the interface between human and environment and address the histories and presents of the racial Capitalocene. In thinking about expanding this research in the future, there are several other artists whose work could be productively placed into conversation with the practices already discussed. One example is Levester Williams whose body of work *dreaming of a beyond: Philadelphia*, 2021 investigates Cockeysville marble. Mined in the U.S. state of Maryland, Cockeysville marble was used for sites central to the founding of the settler colonial state, including the Washington Monument and the columns on the U.S. Capitol Building. Williams' work on the marble connects settler colonialism, mine labor, and racialized constructions of domesticity in Baltimore and Philadelphia. There are many interesting resonances between Nkanga's treatment of malachite and mica and Williams' approach to Cockeysville marble.

In addition to engaging more artworks, I am interested in delving further into the discourses and possibilities of decolonial geopoetics. Thinking more specifically through the lens of geopoetics could further the relevance of this research for scholars analyzing place, space, and materiality outside of art history and visual studies, such as geographers. Further, Aya Nassar writes about the possibility of geopoetics for not just unsettling disciplinary boundaries but disturbing the forms of academic knowledge. She writes: "I like to think of geopoetics as a challenge to our

imagination of masterful selves as academics and as narrators of the world."[542] This is an intriguing invitation to write scholarship *as* geopoetics.

In many ways the works in this study are all landscapes of loss and mourning, integrating human and nonhuman suffering by meditating on land as both fellow sufferer and tool of domination within the contexts of racial capitalism. Each art practice is distinct and deeply embedded within a specific geopolitical context, but by placing them alongside one another, I have drawn attention to the interlinked histories of violence and environmental damage across the African, American, and European continents. The threads of commonality are part of the web of a shared present. They also hold the possibilities of a shared response.

Each of these artists pose a question for themselves: how shall I be in relationship to the ground? And through feeling the soil, clay, and rock in their fingers or under the soles of their feet, they perform being human in community with the nonhuman world. Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter characterize the dominant contemporary understanding of humanity as: "a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script…who practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom."[543] But this is not the only vision of the human. As Tiffany Lethabo King reminds her readers,

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[542] Aya Nassar, "Geopoetics: Storytelling against Mastery," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11, no. 1 (2021): 28, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620986397.
[543] Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," January 1, 2015, 10, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375852-002.

"there are multiple, competing, and non-European forms of humanism that seek to overturn this conception of Man and its hierarchies" and redefining the human has long been a part of anticolonial and decolonial projects.[544] The artists I discuss, informed by the land, are entering into this already flowing stream of redefinition, playing with visual and embodied forms to explore a more livable approach to being human. The human here is intrinsically intertwined with its surroundings, and depends upon the minerals, soil, peat, and herbs not just for sustenance (though this is vital) but for company, for knowledge, and for liveliness. [545]

The stakes of these explorations are high. As I write this in the autumn of 2022, 33 million people are displaced by intensive floods in Pakistan, recent hurricanes have destroyed homes across Puerto Rico and Florida, and droughts in Somalia are predicted to leave a million people in famine this coming winter. The planet stands at the precipice of several potentially devastating tipping points.[546] International bodies of scientists have made it clear that to keep global warming beneath 1.5 degrees Celsius requires rapid and dramatic systems change.[547] Seeing

[544] King, *The Black Shoals*, 17.
[545] The ideas expressed here could be considered in alignment with the South African concept of Ubuntu in which the human comes into being through community. However, this is a complex idea that I am wary of oversimplifying. For example, some scholars write that Ubuntu also implies community with ancestors and future generations and this is not part of the broader focus of the dissertation. The appropriateness of Ubuntu could be an area of future research. James Ogude, ed., *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, World Philosophies (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019).
[546] Timothy M. Lenton et al., "Climate Tipping Points — Too Risky to Bet Against," *Nature* 575, no. 7784 (November 2019): 592–95, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03595-0.
[547] "Emissions Gap Report 2022: The Closing Window - Climate Crisis Calls for Rapid Transformation of Societies" (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2022), https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2022.

and responding to unfolding climate disasters will require people in high-carbon emitting cultures to look beyond the individualist and objectifying lens of racial capitalism and instead address other bodies, human and not, with thoughtful attention.

The financial circuits and exhibition venues of the art world, including galleries, biennials, museums, non-profit art spaces, and foundations, all operate within the logics and structures of racial capitalism and enfolding environmental destruction. As just one example, Montserrat and two collaborators recently sued the Tate, alleging breach of contract and racial discrimination. Their lawyer stated: "This discrimination claim was an important stand against those controlling the purse strings of our national galleries, who not only decide where to spend funds but also what conversations take place."[548] Practices including shipping and packaging artworks; heating, cooling, and lighting exhibition spaces; and the frequent travel of artists, curators, and scholars all have significant environmental impact. From within the constraints of the present, Nkanga, Bopape, Montserrat, and sumell visualize land and human as part of a contiguous, interconnected community and treat both the human and nonhuman members of these communities with curiosity and respect. Through artworks that reckon with the past, they invite the viewer to ponder: how might we give humanness a different and more livable future?[549]

[548] Elaine Velie, "Artists Who Say They Were Silenced Agree to Six-Figure Settlement With Tate," *Hyperallergic*, August 12, 2022, http://hyperallergic.com/753023/tate-modern-six-figure-settlement/.
[549] This is a paraphrase of a question posed by Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick. See Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?," 9.

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