

# **Unsettled Belongings:**

## Poetics of Objects in Migration Narratives of France and the Francophone African Diaspora

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Laura Eugenia Lozano de Celis,  
a quietly fearless  
woman and a life-long producer of knowledge, whose attention to  
nuance shaped my world.

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## ABSTRACT

This study illuminates the constructs of “nation” and “diaspora” as employed by artists, scholars, and state institutions that attempt to articulate a sense of belonging for the contemporary sub-Saharan African diasporas and the French nation-state. It is motivated by the following research questions: (1) How do material objects participate in telling stories belonging to a nation or to a diasporic community? (2) In what ways, if any, do the material objects’ participation in such narratives enable more inclusive forms of belonging? (3) How might turning attention to material objects in the scholarly analysis of narratives of belonging transform current models of human agency and subjectivity? Previous literature on France as a multicultural nation drew on theories of migration rather than diaspora. Meanwhile, literature on the African diasporas predominantly draws on Anglophone sources and focuses on transatlantic slavery as its foundational framework. Even though material objects and material history are crucial to both these literatures, there are few forays into theories of materiality that speak to a more-than-human agency. This study reaches across these gaps, braiding together relevant threads from each field.

To explore these ideas, *Unsettled Belongings* begins with the National Museum of the History of Immigration [Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration] located in Paris, France, reading this space with the work of Sara Ahmed’s migratory skin memories and Jane Bennett’s material agency in mind. Through an analysis of the material objects in the museum’s Gifts Gallery, I demonstrate how these objects subvert the museum’s narrative of colonial citizenship

as the path to national belonging, as well as subvert a human-oriented understanding of agency. The next chapter investigates the kinship of humans and material belongings in two novels: Fatou Diome's *Kétala* (2005) and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2005). The material objects in these novels, I argue, enable queer diasporic desires that enact the texts' resistance to heteronormative framings of diaspora and also invite a readerly empathy based not on shared identity but on a common materiality. The third chapter compares representations of slavery and colonialism as presented in Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, performed in Paris, France in 2015, and the Cape Coast Castle Slavery Memorial site in Cape Coast, Ghana. This chapter contends that a more productive engagement with collective histories is made possible when visitors are invited to remember such traumas via the multisensorial, non-visual qualities of material environments. The final chapter—influenced by Edouard Glissant's poetics of relation and Françoise Lionnet's work on *métissage*—analyzes the multimedia work of Julien Creuzet, arguing that his use of personal belongings and his attention to the tactile relations of material objects produces an aesthetics of diaspora that invites solidarities while keeping, rather than erasing, differences.

These findings prompt a rethinking of the relationship between nation and diaspora as collective identities, and a rethinking of the human and the nonhuman as actors vs. objects. My findings suggest, instead, that these two pairs are engaged in a process of ongoing, overlapping, and mutual constitution—that they are parts of a whole, rather than opposing constructs. Ultimately, this dissertation deepens our understanding of human practices of belonging, and challenges some foundational assumptions about nation and diaspora as collective identities. Moreover, this project makes a case for an interdisciplinary approach to Francophone narratives that combines museology, queer diaspora studies, affect theory, and object-oriented analysis.

## Introduction: STORIED OBJECTS

### *A Beginning: An Origin Story*

All stories begin. Most begin in a time, and in a place.

By the end of *Unsettled Belongings*, I will be arguing that the beginnings—this origin in time and place—of the stories that I tell through these pages do *not* actually emerge in a specific time or in a particular place. Instead, it is the *process* of telling the story that sets up a beginning point; the beginning is a choice and a consequence of the storytelling, not the origin of the story.

But, for now, let's say that all stories begin.

\* \* \*

In 2006, in Paris, the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB)<sup>1</sup> prepares for inauguration. The Musée du Quai Branly, neighbor to the Eiffel Tower, holds an enormous collection of material culture from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania in a vast, intricate building set in a lush garden, the whole ensemble designed by renown architect Jean Nouvel. The then-president president of France—Jacques Chirac, the center-right candidate re-elected in 2002, defeating

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<sup>1</sup> The MQB was initially called the museum of “primitive arts” and then of *arts premiers* (first arts), the updated term for collections from cultures that were once regarded as “primitive” cultures. Eventually, because no suitable term could be found to describe the varied contents of the museum, and because there was great internal debate about whether the museum would be an art museum or an anthropologic museum, the name *Musée du quai Branly*, was settled on, in reference to pier along the Seine which flanks the museum. At its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the museum was renamed *Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac*. See Price (2006) and De l’Estoile (2007) for a comprehensive discussion of the debates and politics operating behind the scenes at this museum’s opening. Clifford (2007), Thomas (2008), and Vogel provide concise and provocative assessments as well.

Jean-Marie Le Pen and his extremist party, Le Front National—had commissioned the Musée du Quai Branly as one of his legacy acts.<sup>2</sup> The MQB, which claims to celebrate cultural dialogue, was set to open just a year after the highly publicized 2005 uprisings in the Parisian *banlieue*.<sup>3</sup> These protests and riots brought to the foreground the tensions between the inhabitants of the *banlieue*—largely minorities, and primarily of West and North African descent if not first-generation immigrants themselves—and police forces. The museum was thus opening at a moment of high tension around issues of cultural and racial diversity. The government had tightened immigration policy, police brutality against people of color appeared to be mounting, and nationwide there was an increasingly hostile environment towards minorities of color and immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

As the opening of the museum approached, the former prime minister of culture for Mali, Aminata Traoré, wrote an open letter decrying a paradox in the French state’s relationship to its former colonies: “Our works of art have the right to reside in the place where we, overall, are barred from entry” (2006 [Ainsi nos œuvres d’art ont droit de cité là où nous sommes, dans l’ensemble, interdits de séjour])<sup>5</sup>. Placing the shared origins of the unwelcome immigrants and

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<sup>2</sup> President Jacques Chirac was elected in 1995 as candidate of the center-right party *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR). In 2002, after Chirac’s re-election, the RPR joined with other moderate-right parties to become *Union pour la majorité présidentielle* (UMP, soon to be renamed *Union pour le mouvement populaire*), in hopes of winning more seats in the Assembly and Senate in the upcoming legislative elections. In 2015, the UMP dissolved and remade itself under the name *les Républicains*, largely under former president Nicholar Sarkozy’s influence, who wanted to run again for president but could not do so under the same party.

<sup>3</sup> The slogan of the MQB is “The place where cultures converse” (“Là où les cultures dialoguent”).

<sup>4</sup> Chirac’s re-election in 2002, when he ran against Jean-Marie Le Pen, is seen as cultural turning point towards more conservative and nationalist politics. Though Chirac beat Le Pen handily, the fact both final round candidates were from the right, and that one of the candidate propagates racist and xenophobic beliefs and policies while advocating for a return to a ‘pure,’ Catholic nation, suggested a backlash against an increasingly racially and culturally diverse France. Though as Mireille Rosello points out in *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*, there are many possible moments that could be accused as the beginning of the end of hospitality towards “others” in the post WWII era, such as President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s 1974 law that attempted to close the border to foreign workers.

<sup>5</sup> All translations in *Unsettled Belongings*, unless alternative bibliographic information is provided, are mine.

the prized material objects under the spotlight allowed the latter to act as an accusation of not only how the French state *represents* their former colonial subjects but also of how it *welcomes* them—or fails to do so.

This is where *Unsettled Belonging*'s story begins.

Traoré phrasing demonstrates how using the same language to talk about the treatment of people and the treatment of objects brings to light the uneven ways in which cultural diversity is valued by state institutions as they define a common ground for living. It likewise brings to light the unequal treatment that different “bearers” of diversity receive, as some bodies are given a place in a national imaginary and some are designated as out-of-place. In addition, Traoré’s rhetorical choice suggests that bringing together the histories of people and material objects can help rewrite histories of cultural exchange that took place in uneven power relations. For example, what happens if we talked about the MQB’s collection, largely objects amassed during France’s occupation of the colonial territories, as having been kidnapped and now held hostage in the museum? What does this tell us about France’s relationship between the people in and from the former colonial territories?

More than one political leaders of France, in fact, has reacted to the tensions of a multi-racial, multi-cultural nation precisely by implementing new programs for the collections of material culture that once belonged to territories outside of present-day France. Chirac, as mentioned, began the MQB project in 2002, as a way to signal a new politics of immigration and integration. This project began right after he defeated right-wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen in the final presidential round. Now, in 2018, current president Emmanuel Macron has appointed two people to develop a plan to repatriate objects in France’s national collections to the object’s countries of origin. His announcement comes less than a year after he defeated Le Pen’s



daughter, Marie Le Pen, who represented the Front National in the final presidential round.

Another way to put it is that when Chirac won against the Front National, he built a house for the objects that had been taken from France's former colonies. Having defeated Marie Le Pen (who, like her father, gained voter popularity by stoking anti-immigrant sentiment and nostalgic white nationalism), Macron proposes returning the collection to its rightful "home." Chirac and Macron adopted opposing strategies for dealing with the material belongings of France's empire but with the same aim: to reaffirm multiculturalism as a national value, while reassuring conservative voters that France belongs to the French.

I suggest, then, that the way the French state manages material culture of other peoples is inextricably tied its attempts to manage national cohesion. Throughout *Unsettled Belongings*, I seek to articulate this unspoken connection that scaffolds the relationships between humans, institutions, and objects. I do so by making explicit this move of bringing people (human bodies) and objects (nonhuman material bodies) into the same field of action. Though I will call into action different types of nonhuman material bodies, not only those that are deemed to be cultural artifacts worthy of institutional collections, I hope to demonstrate how bringing the interactions between humans and objects to the forefront exposes the contours of the rocky terrain onto which collective identities are staked. In delving into the role of material objects in narrating and navigating collective identities, I argue, we gain a new field in which we can work on the shortcomings of existing discourses of collective identity.

Each chapter investigates the origin story of a collective identity, exploring how humans and objects participate in making—or remaking—the story of the origins that enable them to claim an affinity to a place or people. In the first chapter, *Arrive*, I discuss the relationship between immigration and the "host" nation, investigating how the objects in one museum—

Paris's immigration museum—participate in the story of the French nation. The second chapter, *Return*, considers the relationship between individual migrant subjects and the nation left behind. At the same time, the chapter *Return* considers how the predominant narrative framework of diaspora conditions these subjects' gendered experience abroad and at home, through an analysis of two novels that rely on material objects as narrative agents: *Kétala* by Fatou Diome (2006) and *Becoming Abigail* by Chris Abani (2005). The third chapter, *Remember*, examines how the foundational events of the black African diaspora—the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism—are called into the present through the Cape Coast Castle Slave Memorial in Ghana and Brett Bailey's performance-installation in Paris *Exhibit B*. This chapter asks what kinds of solidarities the two memorials' material environments encourage. The last chapter, *Encounter*, considers what it means to be both a national subject *and* a diasporic subject, through an analysis of the use of texture in Martinican artist Julien Creuzet's oeuvre. This chapter argues that Creuzet's artworks re-imagine some of the prevailing metaphors of the relationship between migration and nation. Taken together, the four chapters offer multiple points of entry to understanding the narrative agency of material objects, how such agency has been harnessed in the discourse on human subjectivity, and what it offers for remaking a sense of being and belonging in the world, particularly for postcolonial, racially-othered subjects.

***Another Beginning: A Tetrahedron***

The beginning that I just laid out produces an origin story of its own. It points to an event (Traoré speech) that sets in motion a journey (mine, as the writing subject of this dissertation and the ideas in it). I place this story as the opening to *Unsettled Belongings* because I recognize its narrative force. It clarifies and distills the complex contexts and overlapping ideas explored by the dissertation into a single, short, anecdote. Additionally, it conveys the political and ethical imperatives of the questions the dissertation poses. However, at the same time, I want to resist

entering the chapters of the *Unsettled Belongings* through its (narrated) origins. While the narrative is seductive without being simple, it nevertheless flattens some concepts that I want to maintain in their three-dimensionality. I thus wish to offer, instead of an origin story, a tetrahedron.

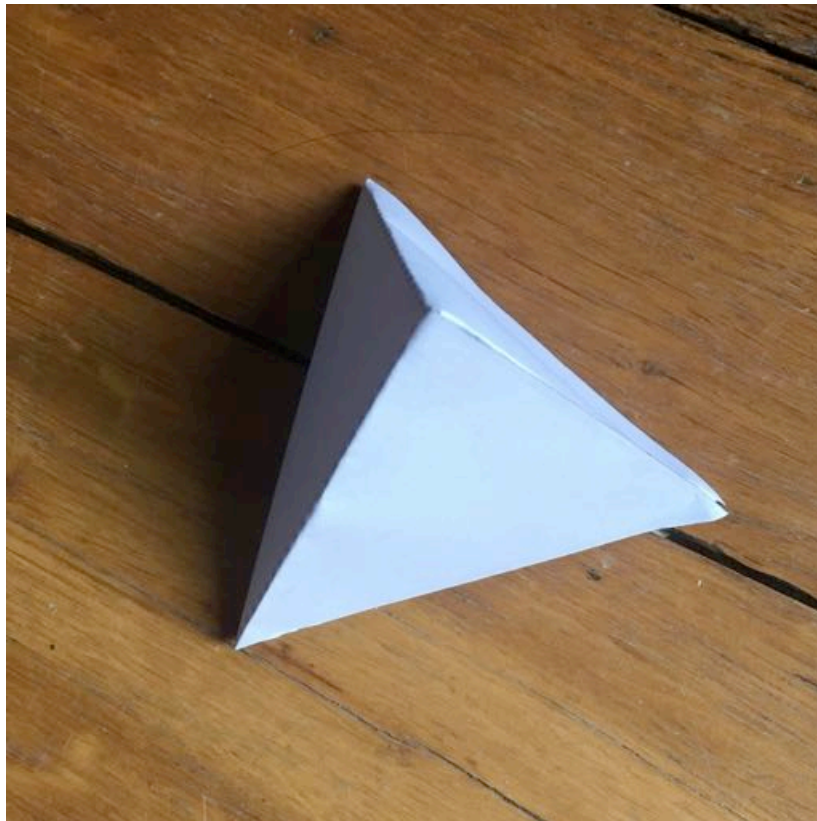


Figure 1 Tetrahedron

A tetrahedron is a four-faced triangular polyhedron—think of a pyramid with perfectly congruent sides. In this type of pyramid, all the faces (or planes) are identical in size and angle, and its edges are of equal length. Any of the planes can serve as a base. At each of the corners, three of the faces converge. If one were to pull the three converging faces away from each other, opening the tetrahedron, so to speak, one would end up with a two-dimensional triangle with the same angles as the individual faces—three identical triangular petals sprouting from an identical central triangular. This flat triangle that can be folded back up into a tetrahedron is called the *net*.

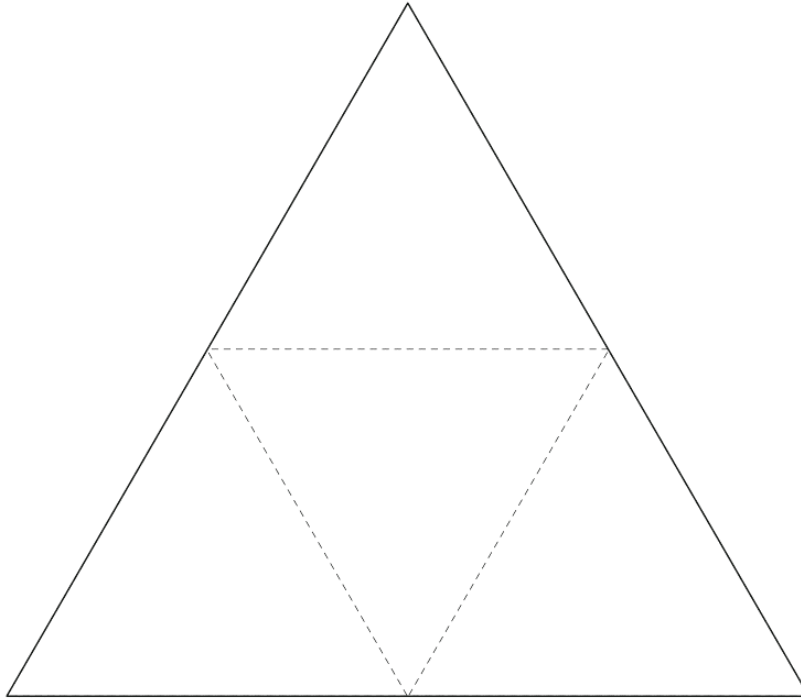


Figure 2 Tetrahedron Net

I propose that you think of the body of this dissertation as a tetrahedron, and the introduction as its open net. The four faces of the dissertation-as-tetrahedron are: what material objects do in lived experience (i.e. in the “real” world); what they do in narration; how what they do changes according to the medium of the narrative; and what I, as writing subject, do with material objects. The surface area—what the dissertation and the introduction cover—is the same. The volume, however, is not. In the net (the introduction), the planes create a surface that can be organized into four contiguous parts that can be encountered one after the other. In the tetrahedron (the dissertation), the four planes operate *at the same time*. Let me put it this way: imagine that you, reader, or that I, writer, holds up a tetrahedron and looks through one of its faces—which ever face we choose to consider as the foundation at that particular moment. If the tetrahedron is made of transparent matter and our eyes have the ability to see, you or I will be able to look at our surroundings through the face of the tetrahedron that is before our eyes. As we

look through this plane, however, the other faces of the pyramid will cut into the field of vision, clouding what we see.

This is precisely what I want to happen. In critical scholarship, we often speak of the lenses through which we read our primary materials and write about them. I suggest that this dissertation reads its primary materials through a *tetrahedral* lens. In the introduction, I will first look *at* each “Face,” one by one, as parts of the same a two-dimensional area; in the dissertation’s chapters, I will look *at* while at the same time looking *through* each of the four “Faces” that (in)form it. In other words, in the chapters of the dissertation, all of the “Faces” will refract my readings, working against any semblance of singular vision than an isolated lens could offer. In yet other words, by proposing a tetrahedron as the opening metaphor for *Unsettled Belongings*, I hope that instead of fixing it to an origin point, I make tangible the points of convergence and the splitting of visions that give this book its shape.

### ***One Face: Objects in Lived Experience***

One plane that shapes *Unsettled Belongings* is the question of what are, exactly, nonhuman material bodies? How are they related to things and objects and stuff? What do they to a human’s lived experience of the material world, and why should or could we (humans) care about them anyway? Entering this dissertation through such ontological relations between human and nonhuman material bodies introduces questions about subjectivity in a postcolonial and racialized world. It looks at objects in their “real” world surroundings—that is, the material world outside the pages of a book. This face strives to account for how an understanding of human subjectivity is created via a negation of nonhuman subjectivity. This is the “Face” I will address here.

In *Unsettled Belongings*, I use the term nonhuman material bodies to refer to discrete entities of organic and inorganic matter that are considered to be devoid of the autonomy and

intentionality that we ascribe to humans. Nonhuman material bodies are the things and environments that can be acted upon (by humans) but, in predominant (Western, Enlightenment) understandings of the material world, cannot act on their own.<sup>6</sup> However, these material entities interact, often intimately, with the human body. Nonhuman material bodies clothe, house, comfort, transport, identify, feed, placate, harm, heal, and do much more to, with, and for humans. As these bodies assume roles, functions, and identities in their interactions with humans, they become *objects*: a pillowcase, a bridge, a piece of driftwood, an airplane, a castle. These named objects open, close, and shape possibilities for human action and thought, and humans rely on them to express, communicate, and understand human action and thought.<sup>7</sup>

It is a relationship, one could say, that mediates lived experience. My project, thus, strives to understand “raw” materiality and its mediations. I trace how, through interactions with humans, nonhuman bodies become objects that are deployed to tell human stories of being and belonging in a postcolonial Francophone world. Nevertheless, in my analysis, I balance attention to how humans act upon material bodies with attention to how materiality acts upon the human experience. In other words, I engage in scholarship’s nonhuman turn<sup>8</sup> in that I strive to listen to

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<sup>6</sup> As Susan Pearce outlines it, “the role Western philosophy has allotted to material culture, [...] can be described as subordinate or secondary, in which objects are seen as merely the outcome or product—or even the detritus—of primary thinking, feeling and acting which is carried out elsewhere” (1992; 17).

<sup>7</sup> Pearce again, arguing that, “social ideas cannot exist without physical content, but physical objects are meaningless without social content. [...] It would be impossible to say which came first: the abstract idea of, for example, hammering, or the mental image of a hammer-shaped thing doing its job. ‘Think’ and ‘thing’ are not sequential because our thinking can only be explicit, and no matter how abstract this may appear to be, in fact it inevitably takes material form” (1002; 21-22).

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary examples of the nonhuman turn, understood as a decentering of human subjectivity as the prism for understanding the world and its human condition, include Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* and *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*; Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life*; Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology as seen in “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” *Towards Speculative Realism, Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, among other works; William Connolly’s *A World of Becoming*; Heather Davis and David Turpin’s *Art in the Anthropocene* (2015); Richard Gursin (ed) *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015); Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (eds) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (2010).

*both humans and nonhuman material bodies as agentic beings or actants.*<sup>9</sup> I excavate how nonhuman material bodies arrange and participate in human interactions, *and* note how humans engage with material objects to interact with the world around them. I thus follow Jane Bennett's lead to "depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman" (2012; 224). My project plunges into the moments in which it becomes no longer possible to distinguish subjects and objects within a material assemblage, even though particular qualities of individual bodies within the assemblage may still be identified.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, I am interested in the effects and affects of the multi-bodied assemblage as it operates in literary and exhibitionary narratives.<sup>11</sup> More precisely, I seek to understand what these effects and affects *do* to a human experience of being and belonging when the grounds of collective identities—race, gender, language, geography—undergo seismic shifts. I will return to the notions of narration and belonging in the other "Faces" of the introduction. Before that, however, I want to acknowledge a simmering tension in my own work, which is that the nonhuman turn of this project has nonetheless a deeply human concern. This project aims to use the findings that result from paying attention to the role of nonhuman material bodies'

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Bennett (2010) contends that all material bodies, are *actants* (a term she borrows from Bruno Latour). Actants are "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett 2010; viii). Drawing on Spinoza, she furthermore argues that actants—and actants working together in an assemblage—are connative bodies: they enhance their power and possibility for action through alliances (conscious or not) with other bodies.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow the term assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari, who deploy it to name the networked nature of human agency. Bennett's reading of their work, which (contrary to Graham Harman's reading of it) contends that "despite their robust attempts to conceptualize groupings, Deleuze and Guattari also manage to attend carefully to many specific objects, to horses, shoes, orchids, packs of wolves, wasps, priests, metals, etc." This reading aligns with my interpretation and use of assemblage—a interdependent congregation whose individual parts nevertheless contribute in precise ways. *Narrative* assemblages are the conglomeration of entities out of which stories emerge; this would be, for example, the words of a text and the pages they are printed on in the hands of a reader located at a particular time and place.

<sup>11</sup> I will define my understanding of literary and exhibitionary narratives in another section of the Introduction, but for now, literary narratives can be understood as written texts (novels in particular), and exhibitionary narrative as the storylines that structure the displays of material objects in museums, memorial sites, and art installations.

participation in (narratives of) lived experiences of migration in order to broaden our understanding of human belonging, and to think more creatively about the sources and resources that foster belonging. How humans treat objects, or how humans mobilize objects in their treatment of other humans, then, serves as an avenue for me to think through the implications of and strategies for human cohabitation (with other humans, animals, objects, in built and natural environments).

In that sense, though I am receptive to Graham Harman's argument that an object-oriented critical approach should not reduce objects to their relations, and that the interactions between nonhuman material objects are just as worthy of attention as the relations between human and nonhuman material bodies, it is not the method that I take in this project.<sup>12</sup> I do not disagree with Harman's point that objects cannot be reduced to their relations. Neither do I disagree with his claim that the interiority and the relations of any object cannot ever be fully apprehended. Indeed, my project *does* endeavor to make space for the autonomy, integrity, and opacity of the objects it encounters. However, like Bennett, I suggest that "perhaps there is no need to choose between objects or their relations" (2012; 227). Not only is there no need to choose between objects and their relations, but in this particular project, I place the relations (effects, affects, and interactions) between human and nonhuman material bodies at the center.

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<sup>12</sup> Harman contends that critical approaches that have espoused a material turn tend nevertheless to keep human concerns at the center of their methods and questions. Solely the interactions between human and material objects are explored, at the expense of the relations between nonhuman material objects. Harman suggests that Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO), a trend in philosophy related to the movement of speculative realism, differs in that it explores the relations between objects absent of a human presence. Moreover, he argues, OOO stands in stark contrast to the relational turn in literary and cultural criticism, which Harman describes as understanding texts, identities, and cultures as products of relational contexts with no essential traits. He describes OOO as "a frank *realism* which views objects or things as genuine realities deeper than any of the relations in which they might become involved" while nevertheless acknowledging that "the autonomy and integrity of the object in no way implies the autonomy and integrity of our *access* to the object" (2012; 196; 200). The question that animates an OOO-influenced approach is to identify what in an object persists regardless of its particular relations at a moment in time and place, all the while holding space for the changing nature of its interactions. Though I do attend to the opacity, irreducibility, and elusive persistence of nonhuman material bodies, for this project, this attention is a method rather than the ultimate question.



For the purposes of this book, I am interested in what the materiality of objects and their relations reveal about the human condition of belonging.<sup>13</sup>

In making this statement, I also acknowledge that I fall into the apparent contradiction raised by Harman that practitioners, so to speak, of the nonhuman turn, tend to nevertheless privilege human concerns and human experience above those of the nonhuman entities they bring under the spotlight. I say “apparent” because I argue that it is only a contradiction if we continue to accept the notion that the things we call humans are entirely distinct from the things we call objects *insofar as their capacity to propose ways of knowing and making change in the world*.<sup>14</sup> If we see a *continuity* of agentic capabilities across these different material bodies—if we reject what Pearce calls “the entrenched duality of Western (and in some respects also non-Western) thought”—then human concerns have also nonhuman consequences and vice versa (1992; 17). Because of this, my own interest is pursuing an object-oriented analysis of narratives of (un)belonging falls much closer to Bennett’s (2001; 2010; 2012) and Richard Gursin’s (2015) motivations. Gursin argues that:

A concern with the nonhuman can and must be brought to bear on any projects for creating a more just society. If following Latour and others we take society as a complex assemblage of human and nonhuman actors—not as an autonomous entity or realm that can be appealed to in order to explain why things are as they are, or that can be somehow changed apart from changing the way things are—then the question of political or social change becomes a question of changing our relations not only to other humans but to the nonhuman as well (xviii)

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that nonhuman conditions, practices, and strategies of belonging could not be explored, but simply that such an exploration runs tangent to the concerns of this project and thus will not be addressed in these pages.

<sup>14</sup> As Achille Mbembe argues, “The segregation of human rationality and the division of the mind between an unconscious grounded in the biological (and thus subject to its own laws), and an autonomous reason lodged in consciousness is at the core of modern Western humanities. It is this segregation that allows modern human sciences to think of reason both as the repository of interpretation and free will, and as the sovereign instrument of self-knowing in the pursuit of perfection (Kant). Is this kind of philosophical anthropology valid for every single human culture or region of the planet?” (5; 2016 “The Planetary Library: Notes on Theory Today,” unpublished paper circulated at AHAW)

This ethical and political claim animates my choice of using an object-oriented method, though my claim is more modest. I would not say that a concern with the nonhuman *must* be brought on *every* project for a more just society. Rather, I claim that an attention to nonhuman material bodies, when brought to bear on an analysis of human relations in a racialized world, provides *a* way to attend to the constructed nature of race. It provides a path for attending to the construction of racial categories while holding on to the possibilities and limitations that inhabiting each of our particular bodies, located in a specific place and time, affords.

An object-oriented mode of reading can contribute to existing studies of race and racialized belonging for several reasons. The injustices produced by racialization, particularly in a postcolonial context, have been predominantly framed as a problem of subjectivity and agency closely linked to representation. People of color, it has been demonstrated, were positioned within dominant regimes of representation that systematically called into questions their ability to think, to feel a full range of human emotions, and to participate in social life.<sup>15</sup> This positioning is described as a process of objectification—a stripping away of the personhood of colonial subjects and people of color—that structures not only how members of the dominant (white) culture saw colonized and racialized persons, but how the colonized and racialized persons see themselves. As Stuart Hall argues:

“[Dominant regimes of representation] had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, ‘power/knowledge’. And this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to place some

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<sup>15</sup> An exhaustive list of the scholarship that demonstrates this idea or takes it as a premise would be impossible to cite. In addition to the work that I quote from in this introduction, I will only point attention to some of the works that have been particularly influential for this book. Examining Blackness and subjectivity, Michelle Wright’s *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the Black Diaspora* (2004); with a focus on intimacy, Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* and Candice M. Jenkins’ *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Respectability, Intimacy, and Sexuality in African American Women’s Narratives* (2007). On how gender and race intersect, and the strategies of autobiography in rewriting the regimes of representation, Françoise Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989).

person or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. 70-71

The cultural turn of scholarship, particularly the studies that analyzed the social conditions and creative expressions of postcolonial people of color, either in their country of “origin” or in the diaspora, strove to understand, contest, and deconstruct this dominant discourse by paying careful attention to its contexts of enunciation and reception.<sup>16</sup> Studying the institutional systems, temporal location, social and economic circumstances, and cultural codes that produced and disseminated such (literary, cinematic, artistic, musical) representations helped reveal the process of objectification and its consequences.

My current project is indebted to this earlier work, but proposes that the *materialities* operating in the contexts of enunciation and reception must also be examined. This attention to the materialities at play in regimes of representation will help scholars, I suggest, “expose, connect, and remake the forms of our desire for an ordered reality” (Samantha Pinto 16). Such a remaking may allow us to put into practice more inclusive ways of producing knowledge and being in the world, and articulate collective identities that favor an intersectional empathy. Moreover, I tend to agree with Bennett’s claim that “if a set of moral principles is actually to be lived out, the right mood or landscape of affect has to be in place,” (Bennett 2010; xii). To demonstrate this how attention to materialities opens new readings of racialized being and

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<sup>16</sup> As Chambers puts it, “Members of postcolonial societies and those engaged (mainly in Western societies) in the struggles of women and Blacks or of sexual minorities or marginalized ethnicities are faced with the following political situation: (1) they are not ‘in power’ (although they are to various degrees and in various ways empowered); (2) their ‘identity’ has been constructed by dominant power structures and in the interests of those structures; and (3) it is necessary to change the reality that has been constructed this way, but starting—because there is no alternative—from the way things are now, that is, from within the ‘given’ situation of power” (*Room for Maneuver*, xi)

belonging, I will call on this method to read a passage from one of the seminal texts in critical race and postcolonial studies: *Peau noire, masques blancs* by Franz Fanon.<sup>17</sup>

In this text, Frantz Fanon speaks compellingly of the objectification of black and colonized subjects. He sets the scene:

‘Sale nègre !’ ou simplement : ‘Tiens, un nègre !’

J’arrivais dans le monde, soucieux de faire lever un sens aux choses, mon âme pleine du désir d’être à l’origine du monde, et voici que je me découvrais objet au milieu d’autres objets. 90

‘Dirty nigger’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Markmann 1986, 109

When Fanon is seen and named by another human through his skin color, his sense of self disappears under his sense of being-objet. This objectification, if we follow the next few pages of Fanon’s text, commits violence in that it 1) undermines Fanon’s lived experience and 2) destabilizes his relationship with the material world. These two actions render the reality of Fanon’s lived experience invalid. Objectification, Fanon is suggesting, renders him passive, immobile, unable to act upon the world, unable to “faire lever un sens aux choses” (90). For

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<sup>17</sup> Fanon’s project, in *Peau noire* and in *Les Damnés de la terre* was to develop the tools and methods that colonized and racially-Othered persons could take up to liberate themselves from the state of objectification that impeded their sense of being and belonging—and thus their agentic capacities—in the world. He speaks of the ontological impossibility of being a Black subject, given that one only becomes Black in the face of a White subject, but facing a White subject, the Black person will always already be depersonalized into non-being, into what he considers objecthood. Fanon says: “Il y a dans la *Weltanschauung* d’un peuple colonisé, une impureté, une tare qui interdit toute explication ontologique. [...] L’ontologie, quand on a admis pour une fois pour toutes qu’elle laisse de côté l’existence, ne nous permet pas de comprendre l’être du Noir. Car le Noir n’a plus à être noir, mais à l’être en face du Blanc. Certains se mettent en tête de nous rappeler que la situation est à double sens. Nous répondons que c’est faux. Le Noir n’a pas de résistance ontologique aux yeux du Blanc” (90-91; [In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. [...] Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eye of the white man] Markmann 109-110).

Fanon, objecthood is the inability to make things meaningful—to articulate a sense of being with and through the material world around him as experienced through his body—and thus objectification dehumanizes the racialized subject.

What I suggest, contra predominant readings of this passage in Fanon, is that though Fanon appears to equate objecthood with dehumanization, it does not *have* to produce this effect. Instead, latent in Fanon's very decriing of objectification, is the suggestion that in fully embracing the materiality the human body, many more avenues for making meaning with other material bodies, human and not, open up. This is because humans and objects share physicality. As Pearce writes, "Objects are lumps of the material world. They share this nature with all living things, including ourselves [...] The physicality which we and objects share creates a relationship between us, of which we have to take account as we move around in our lives, and their lengths, breadths, volumes, and degrees of hardness or softness, and their differing abilities to absorb light which means that we see them as multicolored, define this relationship" (15-16). I propose that what Fanon points to—though he does not come to fully articulate it—is that the very process required to "*faire lever un sens aux choses*" is inextricable from the physicality we share with material objects. Becoming-object is thus *not necessarily* objectification, if we rethink the human-object relation.

In predominant readings of Fanon, objectification can be understood as the systemic erasure or denial by a dominant group/individual of another individual or group's ability to enter an agentic relationship with the world and people that inhabit it. In *Peau noire*, Fanon analyzed how language and interpersonal relations participate in this objectification, and strives to imagine a way, through language, of being and belonging for racialized and colonized persons. In *Les Damnés de la terre*, Fanon turned his attention to culture in addition to language, and to

racialized and colonized persons' (individual and collective) relationship with the nation-state, in addition to their interpersonal relations. He articulates how culture and nationality need to be deconstructed and reformulated if colonized peoples are to liberate themselves from the state of objectification these systems produced. Ultimately, Fanon argues that culture and language can be deployed by marginalized peoples to reconfigure the interpersonal and state relations that negated their sense of being and belonging.

Fanon's work broke new ground, animating scholarship for decades. However, I am proposing here that there is another avenue for coming into a postcolonial racialized sense of being that was overlooked in Fanon's work and the work of those that followed him. I propose that we rethink objectification in terms of *becoming-object*, a becoming-object that is a recognition of the limitations of *any* human's autonomous will and agency due to a physicality shared by all humans *and* nonhuman material bodies. Becoming-object, while recognizing the limitations of human agency, I suggest, will point to new alliances that can be formed to increase the potential of making change in the world. In other words, in addition to rethinking the colonized, racialized person's relation to (white) subjects and systems wielding colonial power, I contend that Fanon *also* opened a door into a rethinking of the colonized, racialized person's relation to materiality and the material world around them. This avenue was latent, I suggest, but never fully articulated in Fanon's writing; *Unsettled Belongings* steps in that direction.

To demonstrate what I mean, I will quote at length from a short series of pages in *Peau noire* that begin with the quote excerpted in the previous paragraph. Fanon declares:

Enfermé dans cette objectivité écrasante, j'implorai autrui. Son regard libérateur, glissant sur mon corps devenu soudain nul d'aspérités, me rend une légèreté que je croyais perdue et, m'absentant du monde, me rend au monde. Mais là-bas, juste à contre-pente, je bute, et l'autre, par gestes, attitudes, regards, me fixe, dans le sens où l'on fixe une préparation par un colorant. Je m'emportai, exigeai une

explication... Rien n'y fit. J'explosai. Voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis. 90

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had though lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there in the sense in which a chemical compound is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self. Lam 1986; 109

Here, Fanon speaks of the colonial gaze rendering his human body into nonhuman substances (a compound fixed by a dye) and exploding it into disaggregate pieces. Fanon spends much of *Peau noire* analyzing this gaze, its origins and effects, with the expectation that understanding it will give him the means to overturn it. Much exceptional scholarship followed his lead, exploring the instances and implications of looking in relations of power, particularly between dominant cultural groups and the (disenfranchised) minorities that cohabit with them.<sup>18</sup> I, on the other hand, suggest that instead of examining this human-to-human transaction that takes place through the visual plane, we turn our attention to the transaction between the human and nonhuman material world.

What I am trying to demonstrate, then, is how *intimately* the material world figures in Fanon's reflections. The excerpt cited previously describes how Fanon's material human body disaggregates into nonhuman material things in the process of objectification. Yet, in the following page, he gives an eloquent description of how the human body is *constituted* through intimate interactions with nonhuman material bodies. He states:

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<sup>18</sup> Some of the most widely-read examples include Edward Saïd's *Orientalism*; Mary Louis Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*; Laura Mulovey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*. The "white gaze," the "male gaze," and similar uses of the "gaze" as shorthand for a dominant culture's perception that structures the expression and reception of the cultural production of marginalized populations has enough common currency that it can be found in mainstream critical writing.

Dans le monde blanc, l'homme de couleur rencontre des difficultés dans l'élaboration de son schéma corporel. La connaissance du corps est une activité uniquement négatrice. C'est une connaissance en troisième personne. Tout autour de corps règne une atmosphère d'incertitude certaine. Je sais que si je veux fumer, il me faudra étendre le bras droit et saisir le paquet de cigarettes qui se trouve à l'autre bout de la table. Les allumettes, elles, sont dans le tiroir de gauche, il faudra que je me recule légèrement. Et, tous ces gestes, de les fais non par habitude mais par une connaissance implicite. Lente construction de mon moi en tant que corps au sein d'un monde spatial et temporel, tel semble être le schéma. Il ne s'impose pas à moi, c'est plutôt une structuration définitive du moi et du monde—définitive car il s'installe entre mon corps et le monde une dialectique effective.

[...] J'avais créé au-dessous du schéma corporel un schéma historico-racial. Les éléments que j'avais utilisés ne m'avaient pas été fournis par 'des résidus des sensations et des perceptions d'ordre surtout tactile, vestibulaire, cinesthésique et visuel' (Lhermitte, *L'image de notre corps*; 17) mais par l'autre, le Blanc, qui m'avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récit. Je croyais avoir construit un moi physiologique, à équilibrer l'espace, à localiser des sensations, et voici que l'on me réclamait un supplément. (91-92)

In the white world the man of color encounter difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surround by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.

[...] Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by 'residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,' but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more. Markmann 1986; 110-111

Fanon here draws attention to how a sense of a material self—one's body—emerges out of interacting with other, not necessarily human, materialities. The act of reaching for a box of lighters in a drawer and cigarettes on a table, moving one arm and lightly leaning back, shapes



his bodily sense of space and time. He slowly breaks down the steps that a seemingly automatic gesture entails.

Through this slowing down of the interaction with the objects that hover near him, Fanon demonstrates that the simple act of reaching out is made possible by the deeply embodied knowledge of his material self and material surroundings. This knowledge is built through tactile sensations, kinetic perceptions, and visual interactions over time. It is the most real knowledge he has, and yet, it is disrupted by the White gaze that weaves Fanon into a self that he has not lived. A collection of anecdotes, details, stories (e.g. multiple forms of representation) are ascribed to him as if he had lived them out, and make him question the reliability of his lived experience:

‘Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur !’ Peur ! Peur ! Voilà qu’on se mettait à me craindre. Je voulais m’amuser jusqu’à m’étouffer, mais cela m’était devenu impossible.

Je ne pouvais plus, car je savais déjà qu’existaient des légendes, des histoires, l’histoire, et surtout l’*historicité*, que m’avait enseignée Jaspers. Alors le schéma corporel, attaqué en plusieurs points, s’écroula, cédant la place à un schéma épidermique racial. (92)

‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.

I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above as *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. Lam 1986; 112

In other words, this gaze attacks and shatters Fanon’s unique and embodied history of lived perceptions, experiences, and sensations, replacing it with “un schema épidermique racial” (92).

Fanon (and a number of subsequent scholars) honed in on the gaze as the site for deconstructing the racial epidermal schemata. I, on the contrary, suggest 1) that the racial epidermal schema must be read as a narrative assemblage that includes the gaze, the “mille

details, anecdotes, récits” (e.g. representations) woven together, *but also* the material bodies of the imagined White interlocutor as well as Fanon; and that 2) the corporeal schema—the sense of being and belonging constructed out of a bodily interaction with the human and non-human material world—may be an equally, if not more, productive site for destabilizing the racial epidermal schema that attempts to overwrite it. The remaking of the world may be located precisely in the remaking of the human’s relationship to its materiality.

What I propose, then, is to dive head first into this sense of being that is not visually-oriented nor human-centered, but, rather, tactile and constructed out of lived experiences of materialities—our own and others. Representations, be they literary, historical, or artistic, certainly do participate in this lived experience and push and pull at our sense of being, belonging, and the possibilities of action being and belonging afford. While *Unsettled Belongings* continues to think about *representations* of the experiences of migration, displacement, and the people who undergo them, it approaches these representations as part of narrative assemblages that comprises the humans who make and see them, as well as the material objects and environments in which they are embedded (see the following “Faces” of this Introduction). While Fanon’s critique of the racial epidermal schema as objectifying the postcolonial, racialized subject was groundbreaking and opened a powerful line of critique, I now suggest that we reimagine the becoming-object not as a *negation* of being and belonging, but as an *avenue* for a mode of being and belonging that enables a more just and effective way of remaking the world. This is *not* to erase the violence of de-personalization enacted by colonialism and systemic racism to this day, but to think about the problem differently.

In arguing for tragedy as the narrative lens through which we must envision a postcolonial future, David Scott contends that “what is at stake is something like a refusal to be

seduced and immobilized by the facile normalization of the present” and that “the way one defines the alternative *depends* on the way one has conceived the problem” (2; 6). If we conceive of the problem of racialization as one of representation and visibility, we lose out on other sources and senses for imagining an alternative to the present reality of system racism. Similarly, if we conceive of the problem of losing a sense of being and belonging as one of objectification, we lose out on the possibility of bringing in nonhuman materialities as allies in the remaking of (systemic and interpersonal) oppressive human relations. In a nutshell, this dissertation proposes, firstly, that instead of the gaze, we explore how senses such as touch, smell, sound, and taste participate in relations of racialized (un)belonging. Secondly, it proposes that objecthood does not necessarily equal dehumanization, and that, perhaps, becoming can even be an avenue for re-humanization understood as an expansion of empathy for the human and nonhuman material bodies that inhabit the planet.

Like tragedy, a nonhuman, material turn in the analysis of being and belonging in a racialized society will, I suspect, invite:

neither a complacent acquiescence to the totalizing language of modern reason, nor the fantasy of an exit or escape from the modern conditions that have contributed definitively (if not comprehensively) to making us who we are. [...] tragedy is centrally concerned with our constitutive openness to luck, to fortune, to chance. It shows us in a dramatic and vivid way our very mortal vulnerability to the contingencies of our worldly life and physical embodiment. It urges us to appreciate that we cannot make ourselves entirely immune to the vagaries of misfortune, to calamities, say or loss or bodily desire. Scott 190; 182

Material objects are stubborn things. They occupy space, elicit senses, touch and interact with our bodies in ways that we cannot fully master nor anticipate.<sup>19</sup> In butting heads against objects, scholars seeking to understand racialized being and belonging in a postcolonial world might yet

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<sup>19</sup> As Susan Pearce puts it, “The materiality of objects means that they occupy their own space, and this is how we experience them. Whether we bark our shins against them or put them in our pockets, we understand that where one of them is, nothing else can be” (1992, 16).

push against some of the entrenched ways of knowing that condition the shape of the present, as well as of the thinkable future.

***Another Face: Objects in Narration***

There is another tetrahedral face through which I can enter *Unsettled Belongings*. A face, for example, that forges a line of inquiry into the *narration* of lived experience, rather the world in which lived experience takes place (not that these can be cleanly cut apart). Such a beginning would need to address the question of why look at the narrative power of material objects? And why look at them *specifically* in stories of migration and diaspora? This is the “Face” of the tetrahedral lens that I want to look at now.

I’ve already hinted at how material objects shape the lived experience of social belonging. Turning attention to the materialities at play in narratives of migration and diaspora serves to heed the embodied nature of these experiences of (un)belonging.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, teasing out how the narration in migration and diaspora stories collaborates with different human and nonhuman material bodies, reveals the way gender fractures the experience of place and movement between places. As Mireille Rosello demonstrates in *The Immigrant as Guest*, “Political and ethical discourses tend to privilege discussions of the migrant as a metaphor for a group whose gendered characteristics are less significant than other markers (not only racial and cultural differences, but also numbers and movement)” (119). That gender and sexuality fracture a shared experience of racialization and displacement must be accounted for. This is true not only in narratives of migration, but in diasporic ones. Not only are “nation” and “homeland” often gendered in discourse, but as human bodies move across these spaces, they become marked

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy Scheper-Huges’ formulation captures my use of the term “embodiment” perfectly: “Embodiment concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term ‘habituated.’ All the mundane activities of working, eating, sleeping, having sex, and getting sick and getting well are forms of body praxis and expressive of dynamic social, cultural and political relations.

through gendered values. Ayo Coly argues, for example, that in postcolonial African narratives, “While the homecoming migrant male body is almost always welcomed as a warrior body, its female counterpart is marked as a soiled and useless body” (9). Understanding this process of ascribing difference and valuing differently requires, I contend, interrogating the sensory, material interactions (between human bodies and between human and nonhuman bodies) that produce narratives of migration and diaspora.

In other words, this dissertation strives to pick apart the narration of belonging by understanding migration and diaspora as embodied, sensory experiences with the material world. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s argument that “home is also the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells. [...] The journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience. What migration narratives involve then, is spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied” (89-90). Ahmed points to how the sensory associations of a human body accrue and acclimate as it moves through different locations—and how the sensory experience of a place can fracture one’s affective attachment to it. She calls the sensory associations that influence an individual’s relationship to place *skin memories*: the traces of interactions with the social and material world—worlds that cannot be neatly separated, according to Ahmed. These skin memories shape future interactions with other human and nonhuman material bodies.

What does a critical attention to skin memories do to a critical reading practice of stories of migration and diaspora? Particularly considering that skin is one of the primary coordinates through which race is marked? I will point to two theorists that narrate the formation of skin memories (though they do not label them as such) into their critical analysis of the experience of being and belonging in migration and diaspora. Their attention to the sensory embodiment of

these experiences, I suggest, contributes to the forceful critique of the intersections of race and gender that they articulate. Furthermore, what I find particularly fascinating, is how these critiques enact hesitant gestures of solidarity that mark both the risks of reaching out and the limitation of shared lived experience, while remaining drawn to and desirous of such practices of belonging.

The first scene comes from Chandra Mohanty, who narrates an instance in which her sensory embodiment of home shifts and splits. In 1992, during one of her journeys “home” to India, she finds that anti-Muslim violence, committed in the name of Hindu nationalism, has transformed “her” city: “The smells and textures of my beloved Mumbai, of home, which had always comforted and nurtured me, were violently disrupted. The scent of fish drying on the lines at the fishing village in Danda was submerged in the smell of burning straw and grass as whole *bastis* (*chawls*) were burned to the ground” (132). The odor produced by the materials (straw and grass) that composed the homes of Mohanty’s Mumbai fractures her ethical, political, and religious affiliations with the city. Mohanty describes that she had thought she could reject the rigid hierarchies and authoritarianism of Hinduism while holding on to its rituals and identity. After the 1992 clashes, she writes, “I could not assume a distanced posture toward religion anymore. Too many injustices were being committed in my name” (131). Because anti-Muslim rhetoric was seen as the mark of loyal Hinduism, and Hinduism was considered a sign of commitment to the nation of India, Mohanty finds an increasingly diminished space in which she can feel at home in Hinduism without being in direct contradiction with her other (political, ethical) affiliations that formed her sense of belonging to a home.

Furthermore, Mohanty’s position as an “outsider” (being a U.S. Resident) and as a woman leads members of her (Hindi, Indian resident) community dismiss her protests that

Muslims belong in India. She is told she just does not understand, because she is not really living in Mumbai. That her home, in other words, does not belong to her. Clearly, there are intersecting social and political tensions shaping the way Mohanty asks and answers the questions of “What is home?” in her essay. However, what I want to highlight is that the political setting of the questions is inseparable, in Mohanty’s narration, from the scents and textures that disrupt her sense of being and belonging to (one of) her home(s). Her perception of home, and her place in it, changes through her sensory experience of the topography that was once familiar to her. As the space becomes unfamiliar, so Mohanty, too, becomes unfamiliar in the space

I wish to highlight, then, how a body belongs to a home (a place and community, which may or may not be in the same geographic location) through its senses and affects; how it belongs through its ways of touching and being touched by the world around it, materially as well as metaphorically—or perhaps, more accurately, metaphorically through particular material interactions. In Ahmed’s words: “The lived experience of being at home hence involves the enveloping of the subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being at home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*” (89). The tactile interactions in a space imprint themselves on bodies. In Mohanty’s case, her sensory perceptions of smoke and acrid air rearranged her relationship with the place she called home in the past. It is not that she “gives up” Mumbai as a home-space, but that it inhabits her differently, more uneasily, than before. The sensory experience transformed both her home and her body.

Bodies can also carry these sensations with them into future interactions, affecting how they inhabit new spaces they encounter. In “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” Audre Lorde assesses the complicated relationships she has with other Black women. In the first few pages, she recounts a series of experiences that are, in her narration, examples of being

taught by the world, when she was just a child, to harbor rancor for her Black female body and self. I will cite the first story she tells:

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. The wet smell of winter clothes, the train's lurching. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me, a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us—probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly, I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. 147.

Lorde's narration arrests my attention. And once again, I note the vivid presence of nonhuman material bodies and sensory perceptions that mold the contours of Lorde's story. Lorde clutches her mother's sleeve, the snowsuit that envelops Lorde's body is plopped down on subway seat, the scent of damp clothes fills the rattling car, bodies of all kinds bump against each other in the enclosed space. A very specific material mood is put into play in Lorde's narration of her encounter with a racist exchange. Moreover, it is striking that in this story, where all meaning is communicated via bodily movements, clothing brokers human touch. Lorde's body is enclosed in a snowsuit. Meanwhile, the racist woman is draped head-to-toe in animal trappings: fur hat, fur coat, and leather gloves. These nonhuman material layers obstruct any possibility of skin-to-skin contact. Nevertheless, a deeply intimate and traumatic interaction plays out on the clothes that two human bodies are wearing, suggesting that they are an extension of the human self.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Tanya Camela Logan's dissertation, "Dressing Masculinity Among Black Men in Paris Since the Mid-1970s" for a longer discussion of clothing as a second skin in the construction and contestation of racialized being.



What does this attention to materiality do to Lorde's narration, and how does this skin memory reappear in Lorde's (telling of her) life later? Lorde's snowsuit—a plush, new, blue covering that was meant to *protect* her from the winter wetness that plagued all the subway passengers—*exposes* the violence of the woman's gesture. Rather than protecting Lorde, it becomes the vehicle through which Lorde is made to learn she does not belong. The woman's racist repulsion is such that she would rather experience the discomfort of standing on a teetering subway, clutching a damp strap rather than risk touching a Black child's clean clothing with her own coat. In the same movement that the woman stands up to get away from Lorde, the soft fur of the woman's coat caresses Lorde's face, a gesture that undermines the affective register of the interaction.

Though Lorde's narration places the interaction between herself and the woman at center stage, another story simmers on the sideline. Lorde's sparse yet object-oriented narration made this sidelined story catch my eye upon re-reading with an attention to the objects that populate the narrative. Heavy shopping bags fill the arms of Lorde's mother—a light-skinned Black woman from the West Indies—but since there is only one tight seat open in the subway car, her mother pushes Lorde down to sit while she remains standing. The fur-clad woman is on one side of Lorde, but on the other, sits a (white?) man, reading a newspaper. As I read this scene a second time, it occurred to me that in that dense space of a subway car, there are *two* gestures of racist and gendered violence emerging from the clutter of material objects in the narration. There is the woman's overt gesture of pulling away and standing up to avoid tactile contact with Lorde's body. This is the gesture that Lorde's essay dwells on and makes explicit. But her narration also tells of the man who continues to read, unruffled, a newspaper of all things.

Reading a newspaper—instead of, say, a book—is an action that requires having one’s arm up and spread out; the man, in other words, takes with aplomb a substantial amount of space in what is a crowded public setting, where in the norms of civic life one would normally pay attention to sharing space. He neither moves to make more space for the child that is squeezed down next to him, nor moves to let a person with their arms full of packages sit down. The cultural norms of New York City in the early 1940s would dictate that a man would give up his seat on public transport to a woman, especially a mother, and especially if burdened with heavy objects. The complete disregard for Lorde and her mother’s presence is another type of racist interaction, one that demonstrates how a similar structure of feeling—disregard for the humanity of a different race—manifests itself differently in bodies as they are gendered. The white man refuses to move his body for a black woman and her child, while the white woman moves her body away from them. And in all this, there is Lorde’s mother, who “pushes [her] little snowsuited body down” (147). This meeting of two bodies, Lorde’s mother reaching out to her and pushing her down, is fraught with ambivalence. It seems to be both a rough and tender gesture. Hurried, because she is burdened; hurried, because the opening into a seat might soon be snatched by someone else, and she wants to give her daughter a small comfort in a rough ride. Yet the protective gesture of finding her daughter a seat ends up exposing her to an act of racist disgust.

These experience infiltrates Lorde’s body, inhabiting how she moves in the material world around her, animating her sense of being in the spaces she moves in later in life, and inhabiting her narrative strategies. Later in the essay, Lorde recounts another incident, one that happened as an adult:

I stand in the Public Library waiting to be recognized by the Black woman library clerk seated a few feet behind the desk. She seems engrossed in a book, beautiful

in her youth and self-assuredness. I straighten my glasses, giving a tiny shake to my bangles in the process just in case she has not seen me, but I somehow know she has. Otherwise motionless, she slowly turns her head and looks up. Her eyes cross mine with a look of such incidental hostility that I feel pilloried to the wall. To male patrons enter behind me. At that, she rises and moves toward me. 154

The material setting in this scene stands in striking contrast with the subway scene. In the library, one can imagine silence, dry air, spaciousness. The bodies are not jostling against each other, on the contrary, they have the luxury of space and stillness. This time, Lorde is standing and the woman she faces is sitting down, and the act of hostility is not an eagerness to move away from Lorde, but a studied reluctance to approach her. The hostility of the librarian comes not from a difference in class and race, as in the scene with the fur-clad woman in the subway. Instead, it is a *sameness* that drives the interaction: both women, both Black, both presumably educated, both lovers of books it seems. Yet, instead of providing a point of solidarity, this shared experience of blackness and womanhood stokes hostility. Once again, Lorde's narration uses material objects to spur moments of action. Lorde adjusts her glasses and lets her bracelets clink against each other, using this noise to force the woman's attention to her, but it is not until two male (white?) bodies walk into the space that the librarian finally approaches Lorde.

Through her narration, Lorde demonstrates how experiences of interracial and misogynist hatred weld themselves to her. She illustrates how her body brings these memories into the spaces she longs to share with black women, and sees the embodied memories seep into that space. Even though the librarian resembles other Black women that Lorde loves—"Why does she wear my sister's face?"—her sidelong glance and hostile eyes call into space of the library the wide eyes of the white woman on the subway (154). Lorde consistently points to the material settings and sensory elements that mediated her social interactions, and points to how the material objects in different setting trigger and intervene in her embodied memories. Finally, she deploys material objects in her processes of remembering and narrating lived experiences to pull

a reader's attention to processes of racialization and gendering that shape Lorde's sense of subjectivity. Through all this, she forms a profoundly specific knowledge of being and belonging in a racialized world as a black, gendered, subject of the African diaspora.

I wish to suggest, however, that she also points to ways of remaking affinities and solidarities—while acknowledging their limits—through her object-oriented narration. When I re-read the scene in the subway car, following the arms full of packages and the arms filled with a newspaper, I began to see how Lorde's narration provides the materials for investing in Black female solidarity even as she demonstrates the multiple forces that work against it. Lorde and her mother experience a similar racism in the very same moment, even though the expression of the violence is gendered by their interlocutors. Lorde's narration does not suggest that a mere recognition that her mother and her share an experience of racialized social violence leads to an easy affinity. Indeed, Lorde's work remains powerful precisely because it layers these complexities onto each other. The answer she points to in the final pages "I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving," is a relearning of bodily memories (174). The path however, is one that opens out of the profoundly specific conditions of being a black woman in America. And what Lorde's object-oriented narration tells us, I suggest, is that her experiences cannot be appropriated to produce a universal truth. But rather, that the work of being and belonging—even in experiences marked by the global phenomena of migration, diaspora, and racialization—must answer to the specific, material, sensory, and social conditions that traverse it.

What I have tried to point out through the close reading of Mohanty and Lorde's object-oriented narration via Ahmed's notion of skin memories, is how stories of migration and diaspora often point to unhomely feelings—the feeling of not belonging, being at odds—with the

world that one sees, smells, and touches on a daily basis. Even if one has lived in the same place for a close to a lifetime, or for generations. The state of being-at-home, then, is both a physical, sensory one, and an affective, social one. These three theorists invite us, as readers, to dwell on the role that the materialities of objects, environments, and bodies play in creating and narrating both unhomey feelings and the state of being-at-home. The ways of knowing the self that they outline, and the modes of action they point to, texture our understanding of migration and diaspora by noting and narrating the fractures of race and gender in practices of belonging. Finally, they suggest that the affinities, attachments, and ally-ships to collective identities must address the asymmetries within shared lived experiences, rather than assuming a facile solidarity can be born of them.

***Another Face: Objects in Site-Specific Mediums***

In the other “Faces” of this introduction, I address what material objects do in the world, and what they do in narration, and what I do with them. Yet another possible way of entering this project would be to set out the primary sites that nourish its work. Such a beginning, grounded in the specific examples discussed in *Unsettled Belongings*, could orient the reading of its chapters along questions of medium, genre and narrative strategy. This “Face” of the tetrahedron is the one I wish to turn to now.

I have selected four site-specific mediums that will be analyzed as narrative assemblages. These are 1) museum exhibitions, specifically, the Galerie des dons (Gifts Gallery) at the Musée National de l’histoire de l’immigration (National Museum of Immigration History) in Paris, France; 2) memorial sites, specifically, the Cape Coast Castle Slave Memorial in Cape Coast, Ghana; 3) contemporary art installations, specifically *Exhibit B* by South African artist Brett Bailey and several works by Martinican artist Julien Creuzet; and 4) contemporary novels, specifically Senegalese author Fatou Diome’s *Kétala* (2005) and Nigerian author Chris Abani’s

*Becoming Abigail* (2005). Each of these four types of sites deploy material objects in the production of narratives, but the roles they assign to the objects, their engagement with the object's materialities, and the narrative voice and subject positions they invite their publics to adopt, all differ.

A narrative traces the unfolding of a set of actions over time. In this dissertation, using the term *narrative assemblages* helps me account for a multitude of human and nonhuman actors that participate in the creation, communication, and consequences of the narratives under analysis. In other words, I consider how each exhibition, memorial, installation, or novel is a multi-bodied congregation—an assemblage of words on a page; display apparatuses; named and unnamed material objects; temporal and geographic locations of production and reception; human bodies that create, write, view, read; and so much more. These are assemblages because they do not have a single point of origin nor linear movement, rather they produce a swarm of narratives through the push and pull of these many human and nonhuman bodies that enter and exit the assemblage. Jane Bennett speaks of texts as “a distributive network of bodies: words on the page, words in the reader’s imagination, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading room, etc., etc.—all these bodies coacting” (Bennett 2012; 232). This dissertation analyzes literary texts through this framework, but considers, in addition, narratives assemblage that are made up of words on a wall label, the sight of material objects, the sounds of a visitor’s steps as they walk through an installation, etc.

While I focus specifically on the role—the narrative techniques and effects—of material bodies in these assemblages, *Unsettled Belongings* does not attempt to identify a universal poetics of objects. Instead, I tease out what is specific about the relationship between humans and objects in each of these types of narrative assemblages. I also seek to understand how these

narrative assemblages participate in larger discourses of being and belonging, through their representations of the lived experiences of migration, displacement, diaspora. While the specificities of each type of narrative assemblage will be discussed in their corresponding chapters, I will briefly sketch out a few preliminary considerations—concerns, questions, or points of interest—raised by each genre of narrative assemblage that will be helpful to keep in mind.

*Museum exhibitions*: As narrative assemblages, museum exhibitions provide a fertile ground for analyzing how state institutions deploy material objects to construct a citizenry. I fall in line with Tony Bennett’s history of the museum in Western Europe and North America, *The Birth of the Museum*, in which he demonstrates how “museums formed a part of new strategies of governing aimed at producing a citizenry which, rather than needing to be externally and coercively directed, would increasingly monitor and regulate its own conduct” (1995; 8). The narrative assemblages operating through museum exhibitions, thus, are closely related to the production of national identity and practices of citizenship deemed proper by the ruling nation-state. As such, it makes sense to interrogate museum exhibitions in a project that asks what it means to be in and belong to a nation. Moreover, it is particularly important to bring museum exhibitions into consideration in a project on racialized being and belonging. The collection and exhibition of material culture—and persons—from Africa in Western Europe led to the development and dissemination of biological understandings of race as well as evolutionary approaches to cultural development.

In France more particularly, the practices of collection and exhibition were closely tied with colonial conquest. Bennetta Jules-Rosette and Erica Fontana argue that

that the museums of colonial and postcolonial France had three narrative stages: “The first narrative stage is contact and conquest. [...] The second phase is domination, acquisitions, and accumulation. [...] The third cultural narrative [...] is that of the implosion and saturation of culture” (86). In each of these stages, Jules-Rosette and Fontana argue, the techniques of display, classification practices, and relationships to the publics provides clues for analyzing France’s relationship to the inhabitants of the mainland and the colonies that were racialized as Africans. Given this history, museum exhibitions are a key site for addressing this dissertation’s exploration of how human and nonhuman bodies interact to express, impose, or remake notions of individual being and collective belonging in a postcolonial world.

*Memorial sites:* Like museums, memorial sites are three-dimensional narrative assemblages, often managed by state or international actors. Like museums, they encourage visitors to accept a particular understanding of and relationship to the material content on display—and to each other. I examine memorial sites in addition to museums, however, because they pose slightly different questions. Namely, memorial sites, though tasked with remembering a past event, have significant consequences for the future. As Tony Bennett argues, “The shape of the thinkable future depends on how the past is portrayed and on how its relations to the present are depicted” (162). Often, and in the case of the sites discussed in this dissertation, what is at stake is making a more just future thinkable. The ethical and social imperatives of memorial sites allow me thus to investigate the kinds of futures that become thinkable, depending on the interactions between human visitors and the material space of the memorial site. Inviting the Cape



Coast Castle Slave Memorial site into the dissertation is a way to make a case for the ethical consequences of aesthetic choices in practices of commemoration.

A second particularity of memorial sites is that, unlike museums, they tend to have relatively *few* things to see. Being often located in ruins, abandoned buildings, empty fields, memorial sites cannot rely on a visually-rich collection of material objects to tell their story. The narrative force of memorial sites, then, relies more heavily on senses beyond the visual, and requires an imaginative investment on the part of the visitor.<sup>22</sup> The narrative assemblages of memorial sites, I thus suggest, function through mechanisms that are not quite the same as museums; they can teach us about how human and nonhuman bodies are co-constitutive in the formation of being and belonging through other kinds of interactions.

*Contemporary art installations:* I have selected two contemporary art installations for discussion in this dissertation, because it is an aesthetic practice that often thinks critically about the predominant technologies of display and categories of objects used by museum exhibitions and memorial sites. There is, in fact, a trend of institutional critique, reinvigorated in the 1990s by artists such as Fred Wilson, Renée Cox, and Andrea Fraser,

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, there will almost always be a kinetic interaction in even conventional museums exhibitions, as the visitors move through the space to see the displays, and the material environment produces effects, intentionally or not. (See Constance Classen's "Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum" for a historical inquiry into the multisensorial experience of visitors at a 17<sup>th</sup> century British museum.) Moreover, recent work in museology has trended toward imagining a multisensorial museum, and institutions are increasingly working on exhibitions that engage the visitor through multiple senses and form of interaction, not just looking (Black 2005; Classen and Howes 2006; Pye 2007; Chatterjee 2008; Candlin 2010; Dudley 2010; *Senses and Society* 9.3 2014; Papastergiadis 2016). And certainly, some genres of museums (e.g. science museums, children's museums) have a longer tradition of interactive displays that require a kinetic engagement. However, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, museums invited visitors first and foremost to see and learn how to see—certainly not touch, listen, smell, or interact with the material objects on display through other senses.

that hones in on the interplay between race, colonialism, and globalization in museums.<sup>23</sup> This dissertation asks how exhibition technologies and categories—which, as mentioned, were often used in the fomentation of biological understanding of racial difference and racialized belonging—are repurposed by contemporary artists to tell alternative stories of race and belonging. The museum exhibitions and memorial sites that I analyze tend to represent a dominant, institutional, or governmental voice. Bringing in examples of creative expression produced by the people being spoken about (and sometime spoken for) in the exhibitions and memorial sites, allows me to consider how narratives shift when the subject positions and aesthetic purposes of the human actors in the assemblage change. In addition, though I argue in my chapters on museum exhibitions and memorial sites that there are creative curatorial and aesthetic choices that participate in the narrative outcomes of the assemblages, creative expression like arts and literatures allows for more ample room for maneuver. In terms of narrative, they are an exercise in fiction instead of fact, fiction which fosters imagination, or, “the ability to think oneself out of reality into an *irreal* but *possible* sphere” (Miller 1990; 297). The shape of the thinkable future, I argue, requires not just an examination of how the past is represented in the present, nor only a deconstruction of that present, though both of these are essential. It requires, in addition, a pressing against the limits of the thinkable future through creative practice. Novels: It might seem odd to label a literary text a site-specific medium, as one of the very hallmarks of literary narratives is the portability. A book can be tossed into a

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<sup>23</sup> The Institutional Critique movement, now recognized as a historical category, began in the late 1960s. A symposium held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art energized a group of artists, including Michael Asher and Hans Haacke, to create performances, architectural interventions, and/or ephemera that make visible the inner workings and implicit logic of art institutions and markets. See Janet Marsine’s *Critical Practice: Artists, Museums, Ethics* (2017) and John C. Welchman’s edited volume *Institutional Critique and After* (2006).

backpack or downloaded onto a smartphone and pocketed. I insist, nevertheless, on including literary texts in a project that explore materiality as a narrative tactic for three reasons. The first is to emphasize that even if a literary text is not site-specific, the act of *reading* is site-specific. A person is located in a particular time and place at the moment they read the literary text through a material support, be that book pages or tactile screen. The location, time and support might change during the process of reading, but each instance of reading is enveloped in material trappings.

The second reason is related: reading is an embodied experience. As Neville Hoad contends, “Fiction addresses the subject’s imagination, an imagination that is paradoxically but profoundly embodied; paradoxically because the act of reading (sitting still, being transposed to another world) is often a disembodied experience; profoundly because imaginative identification involves the entire sensorium” (Hoad 2007; xxx). In contrast to museum exhibitions, contemporary art installations, and (to a lesser degree) memorial sites, the narrative assemblages of literary texts must call into being the deeply physical presence of material objects not through direct bodily perception, but through the imagination and embodied memories.

The third reason for including literary texts is that reading furthermore shapes the interaction humans have with other bodies before, after, and beyond the textual interaction. As Jane Bennett puts it, “Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perceptions more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash” (Bennett 2012; 232). Reading can change human perception of, and affection for, the material bodies that we encounter in the “real” world.

I spend less time on this “Face” of the Introduction’s tetrahedral net because many of the site-specific considerations of material objects will be more productive to discuss in their particular chapters. But, I hope that looking at this face has helped me (writer) and you (reader) orient ourselves to the questions raised by the primary material I have selected for the dissertation.

***A Final Face: What I do to Objects***

Another plane of the dissertation-as-tetrahedron that I wish to face is my own subject position, as reader and writer. This means reflecting on how my self, my skin memories, the material spaces I traversed and my own set of ever-changing affinities shaped the objects in *Unsettled Belongings*. How, in other words, does my lived experience and my writing body, and my set of intellectual and aesthetic affinities, contribute to the selections and omissions that constitute the critical approaches and corpus of the dissertation?

The answers I propose in this “Face” will be partial, but I hope they serve to circumscribe my argumentative claims and work against any appearance this dissertation may have of simply throwing out old categories to erect new ones. It is a practice, I hope, of *non-coercive writing*. I pull this concept out of Françoise Lionnet’s articulation of non-coercive reading:

To read non-coercively is to allow my self to be interwoven with the discursive strands of the text, to engage in a form of intercourse wherein I take my interpretive cues from the patterns that emerge as a result of this encounter—in other words, it is to enjoy an erotics of reading somewhat similar to Barthes’s in *The Pleasures of the Text*. 28

For Lionnet, non-coercive practices of reading allow for what is unique to a particular reading experience to contribute to the production of meaning. Interpretation, in Lionnet’s framing, is mutually constitutive engagement between the specific text, its context of enunciation, *and* the reader’s embodied locality. Each of these parts is transformed in their encounter through the production of meaning. It is thus an encounter in which the reading subject is empowered to listen to the resonances that the text makes across their lived experience and previous encounters

with other human and nonhuman material bodies (e.g. texts read previously, but also, places, objects, physical exchanges).

A non-coercive writing practice, I suggest, is a continuation of this interweaving of the self into the production of meaning. In following the interpretive cues of the narratives that I analyze and transmitting them to these pages, I allow the specific (and often chance) encounters that I had with material objects (including texts), people, and places to infiltrate the questions I pose, the conclusions I draw out, and the *way* in which I write them down. I recognize, for example, that laying side-by-side a slave memorial site in Anglophone Ghana for comparison with a contemporary art installation in France (even if it represents, in part, the history of transatlantic slavery) in the third chapter may seem like an odd choice. Not only because this is a dissertation in Francophone studies, but also because the two mediums—memorial sites and contemporary art installations—have different modes of production, creative licenses, and ethical imperatives. They come together in this dissertation because, by chance, I encountered both in the same year. That temporal proximity led me to notice other patterns, in the way the audiences of these sites spoke about belonging to collective histories, and what rights to remembering and representing those histories such belonging allows one to claim, or not claim. In writing that chapter, I attend to the limits and impropriety of the comparison I set up, while nevertheless demonstrating what knowledges are produced in the encounter between these two sites and my self, ways of knowing that would not have come about otherwise.

This may seem to be an *undisciplined* practice, contrary to the disciplinary exigencies of scholarly production and communication. Ahmed speaks of “disciplinary homes” that dictate ways of ordering space, time, method, evidence, and ultimately, what is salient knowledge (2006; 22). Lisa Lowe describes it as this: “The modern division of knowledge into academic

disciplines, focused on discrete areas and objects of interest to the modern national university, has profoundly shaped the inquiry into [the connections of the four continents]. Even the questions we can ask about these histories are influenced by the unevenly *inhabited* and inconsistently understood aftermath of these obscured conditions” (1-2, emphasis mine). This dissertation inhabits several disciplinary homes, and sometimes straddles their thresholds. At times, its writing or methods may seem out of place. But given that my project makes a case for how strategies of belonging and homemaking are acted out through materially-oriented aesthetic and narrative practices, I have striven for this dissertation to make a home for itself between disciplines, through specific narrative and aesthetic choices in my writing. In other words, I have aimed to think about the *form* of this instance of scholarly communication, and sculpt that form into something that aligns with the content of the dissertation.

One of those choices is the one I mentioned earlier, bringing into an unholy alliance material sites that would normally be relegated to separate spheres of study. Arguing that such sites belong together is a way of enacting one of the arguments of *Unsettled Belongings*, which is that who, what, and how something “belongs” has more to do with the narration after the instance of encounter, than a preexisting alliance. Another strategy for making the form of the dissertation enact some of the arguments of its content is allowing for multiple framings—multiple disciplinary takes on the world—to coexist, as they do in this introduction through the deployment of a tetrahedral metaphor. Yet another is to provide some discontinuity even within the linear bounds of a dissertation that has a beginning and ending page. While one could start at the beginning and end at the end—and the individual chapters do have a tightly sequenced order—in the introduction I have attempted to construct the “Faces” as stand-alone sections that connect to each other but that could be read in different orders, or in isolation. In a similar vein,

the sequence of the chapters forms a kind of palindrome. The first and the last chapters, *Arrive* and *Encounter*, think through belonging to and making a home in France and are temporally oriented to the future. Meanwhile, the two middle chapters, *Return* and *Remember*, think through belonging and making a home in diaspora, and are temporally oriented to the past. The first and last chapters could be thus read as a pair, and the middle two as their own pair. The patterns and interpretive clues of such a pairing would be somewhat different, but equally valid I suggest, as reading the four chapters in their numeric sequence.

As I make narrative and aesthetic choices such as these, I recognize, too, that I am acting out of ethical and political commitments born out of living in the body that I inhabit and the places that have inhabited my self. I am interested in what it means to belong to a community (singular or plural), to a place (singular or plural), and to draw a sense of being from such attachments, because my own experience of “home” does not fit into the measures offered by predominant home-making narratives. If home is “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination,” I have had a “home” for thirty-some years in Mexico, the place my parents left before I was born (Ahmed 2000; 77). However, my attachment to and desire for that place waxes and wanes over the decades; it fills up in the years when I can travel there and link arms with my relatives and smell the dry polluted air of Monterrey, it fades away in the years where trips to France take the place of any time I could have spent in Mexico. There seems to be something, then, to the idea that I can make a home out of the “lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells” (Ahmed 2000; 89). I am drawn to this strategy of home-making, given that it is both portable—the skin memories I carry with me—and profoundly localized. Nevertheless, this measure, too, has its limits for me. I have never lived in the same city for more than six years consecutively; many of these places have surely left their mark on me, but in ways I cannot know

and the lack of being able to know these lived localities, identify their traces, means they are unfamiliar, undesired “homes” for me.

I could try other measuring sticks to determine where I belong, such as home is where I am right now, in the present. But, my experience has shown me that even this claim has its limits. As a child, when I lived with my parents, no matter how much I loved and felt a part of the place my family was currently living in, “here” was rarely the correct answer when I was asked by other inhabitants of that place, “Where is your home?” If I answered “here,” my interrogator’s face would communicate incomprehension. I would venture, “I moved here from Texas [or California, or which ever state my family has recently left],” but that did not seem to resolve the issue, either. Trying yet another tactic, I might tell the inquisitor, “I was born in Canada,” as answer which I soon learned produced disastrous confusion and was to be avoided at all costs. After enough back and forth, I would eventually arrive at the answer that appeased everyone but me—“Mexico.” A place that I had tender feelings for but had never lived in, a fact that was palpable to me each time we visited. Despite the delight I took in playing with my cousins in Mexico, my time there would be full of clumsy encounters with this locality’s materialities, such as being given only bottled water to drink when all the other children drank from the tap, because my gringa stomach was not habituated to the local water.

All of these measures of home failed me—or failed the person trying to determine my “home”—while I lived in the United States, because the brown-skinned body I inhabited, and the softly inflected English my mouth produced, fractured the expectation of what someone “from” the United States looked and sounded like. “Home” as one’s mother tongue was also fraught: my first words were in Spanish, but I felt and feel most at home in English, and sometime French seeps into my Spanish. Moreover, all three languages, when I employ them orally, are “marked”



by an accent, a sign of not-belonging. When I first lived in France in 2006, racialization and not-belonging were just as present as they had been in the United States, but in another way. I learned that the North African men in Toulouse would hail me as “ma soeur” instead of “madame” or “mademoiselle” because they identified my hair and skin color as belonging with the North African women that lived in the neighborhood where I went to buy produce. Physical appearance and imperfect command of the language meant that, like in the U.S.A., I was often asked to account for my “home.” If I said I was American, a lengthy interrogation into my “origines” began. Unlike in the U.S.A., however, I tended to welcome this, perhaps even claiming Mexico as my home right off the bat, as this was during George W. Bush’s presidency: any distance I could put between myself and the country that I actually came from (and, to my surprise, missed) was welcome.

In other words, Like Ahmed<sup>24</sup> and like Chandra Mohanty,<sup>25</sup> home as sensory experience, home as origin, home as birthplace, home as language, home as location of family, or home as location of those I have chosen to call family, is not condensed in a single place, or even two or three. It is a multitude of lived localities, affinities, and embodied memories that overlap, uneasily and asymmetrically. Home is a number of places where I have been, am going, or want to return to—and in all of these, home is never really in my hands. Like Ahmed, Mohanty, and also like Audre Lorde, my experience of what belonging to the places I felt I had some claim to call home collided with the ascription of race and gender to my self by those who also live in

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<sup>24</sup> “You might say I have multiple homes, each one a different kind of home: home is England, where I was born and now live, home is Australia, where I grew up, and home is Pakistan, where the rest of my family lives” (2000; 86-87).

<sup>25</sup> “What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are “my people”? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space? [...] I am convinced that this question—how one understands and defines home—is a profoundly political one. [...]” (126)

those places and have other claims of belonging. I recount these anecdotes to demonstrate how my particular material body and set of lived localities makes it so that “no clear or obvious fit between geography, race, and politics for someone like me” in the current ways we speak about collective and individual belonging to a home (Mohanty 135). However, if this lived experience of my body in different localities influences my intellectual affinity with Ahmed, Mohanty, and Lorde, and with the work of the Francophone African and Afro-Caribbean authors and artists that I analyze in dissertation, I recognize, at the same time, its asymmetries.

My experiences of migration as a child were privileged by my parents’s education, cultural capital, and eventually, their financial prosperity. My experiences of migration as an adult have been “chosen,” and made less daunting by a US passport and access to a student visa.<sup>26</sup> If at times uncomfortable, my experience in a brown body in the U.S.A. has nevertheless been protected from some of the more violent forms of racialization, because I move in elite spaces where I am less likely to be picked out as one of the Mexican immigrants stealing jobs (or other slanders, or physical violence). Furthermore, as a cisheterosexual woman, my gendered body lets me escape the formula Mexican + male = “bad hombre” that the current United States President propagates. In France, even if my “true” identity of Mexican is discovered, unlike in the U.S.A., it is treated as a novelty, and the beauties of my “homeland” and the generosity of its people will be touted—with racialized tinges, perhaps, but not of the kind that makes me fear for my physical safety. None of this protects me from the administrative violence that is routine in immigration proceedings in France—a violence that I did not have to confront directly in the U.S.A., as I became a citizen while still a minor—but it is, once again, tempered by my American passport, my fluidity in the French language, and my ambiguous ethnic origin that

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<sup>26</sup> The notion of a “chosen” migration is problematic, but not a digression I will take in these pages.

tends to be read as exotic rather than threatening or suspicious. And in no locality am I subject to the unique history that will, in Fanon's words, subject African American and Afro-descendant persons not to "une connaissance de mon corps en troisième personne, mais en triple personne [...] à la fois responsable de mon corps, responsable de ma race, de mes ancêtres" (Fanon 110; [no longer a question of being away of my body in the third person but in triple person. [...] I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors] Markmann 112).

I have pointed to, then, the points that in my embodied experience of migration and racialization that converge with some of the persons and works that I encounter in this dissertation. I have also noted the separate directions that our experiences take after those points of convergence. I recognize that this configuration of racialization, gender, and migration influences not only my interest in such questions, but the kinds of texts and lenses I am drawn to. I could have constructed a corpus of literature written entirely by Francophone Senegalese women, and learned much about racialization, gender, and what it means to make a home in a postcolonial world. But I didn't. I chose authors, artists, and institutions, producing work in English and French, whose possible "homes" are many, who speak of migration and diaspora, but often indirectly.

This speaks to how I want to position my self against the persons that I bring into conversation in this dissertation. I place my self next to them, perhaps overlapping with their selves, but imperfectly and asymmetrically. I do not wish to speak *for* others who have experienced racialization and displacement, nor *about* others, but speak to them, next to them, indirectly with them. In other words, if I can speak to Julien Creuzet's—a black, Afro-Caribbean male artist—aesthetic strategies for creating a sense of being and belonging, as I do in the fourth chapter, I can only do so through metaphor, analogy, and indexicality. If I can furthermore ask

Lorde's text speak to Creuzet's installations, I can do so through juxtaposition, uncomfortable alliances, uneasy intersections. For if I am drawn to both Lorde's work and Creuzet's work (to give just one example), it is not only because there are points of convergence in our embodied experiences of belonging through the fraught terrain of migration, race, diaspora, and gender. It is also because what they do with material objects in their creative practice is analogous to what I want to do with material objects in my critical practice: they form, inform, transform the metaphors and strategies for making meaning—and making meaningful homes.

### ***Closing a Tetrahedron***

In this introduction, I have walked the surface of the tetrahedron's net to touch on each corner of its "Faces." What I wish to do now, is fold it up to its three-dimensions and use it to look at and through the materials of *Unsettled Belongings*. My hope is that this dissertation will be of interest to scholars who are working on the topics of migration, diaspora, racialization, gender, and postcoloniality—especially those who explore their intersections. For Francophone studies in particular, I hope that this dissertation puts into dialogue some texts and theories that have not yet been put into conversation, pushing the field towards new disciplinary homes. Indeed, I would argue that one of this dissertation's contributions is bringing in methods and sources from object-oriented analysis into the study of the African diaspora within a specifically Francophone context. A brief overview of the leading studies of blackness, diaspora, queerness, and the nonhuman turn would reveal few that are working with Francophone sources, territories, and context. In my analysis of Fanon in one of the "Faces" of this introduction, I have tried to press on the traces that would allow a reading of the contributions of Francophone postcolonial thought into such fields. In the chapters that follow, I will also attempt to demonstrate what French and Francophone studies has to gain from analyzing Frenchness through the methods, frameworks, and concerns that have animated black diaspora studies and the nonhuman turn.

I also hope that this dissertation will be an invitation to scholars of race, gender, and diaspora outside of Francophone studies to take a second look at the nonhuman materialities at work in their primary and secondary texts, and ask themselves what turning to nonhuman material bodies in their practice of reading and writing can do for this field. For those scholars that have begun their own forays into how thinking through nonhuman materialities in the formulation of race, gender, and being—scholars like Mel Chen (*Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*), Neel Ahuja (“Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World”), and Fred Moten (“The Case of Blackness”), Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (*Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*), Kara Keeling (“Looking for M--: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the future”), Zoe Todd (“An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Debate: Ontology is Just another Word for Colonialism”), to add to those discussed previously—I hope this project enters their conversation in fruitful ways.

## Chapter One: ARRIVE

In 2007, one year after the Musée du Quai Branly's splashy opening (see Introduction), another museum prepares to open in Paris. This museum located in the 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, far from the historic and cultural center of Paris. This museum is the National Museum of the History of Immigration (*Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration*; MNHI). At the time of the MNHI's opening, Jacques Chirac's presidential term has just ended and his protégé, Nicholas Sarkozy, will succeed him. During Sarkozy's presidential campaign, he promised a tough stance on immigration; he proposed to increase the number of annual deportations, and that DNA tests be administered to individuals applying for visas under the existing family-based admissions programs. As part of his immigration reform, Sarkozy will open a new state department called the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, and National Identity.

It is this conflation of immigration and national identity that I want to interrogate in this chapter, since immigration can, paradoxically, be one of the veins through which the boundaries of national identity coagulate. Indeed, the MNHI states that its mission is to “gather, preserve, and promote the history of immigration, giving as many people access to it as possible, in order to raise awareness and give recognition to the role of immigration in France's development” ([rassembler, sauvegarder, mettre en valeur et rendre accessible au plus grand nombre l'histoire de l'immigration, pour faire connaître et reconnaître le rôle de l'immigration dans la construction

de la France]).<sup>27</sup> This statement, like the name of Sarkozy's Ministry of Immigration, Integration, and National Identity, suggests that the regulation of "outsiders" inside the nation goes hand in hand with the preservation of national identity. As feminist postcolonial scholar Sarah Ahmed notes, rather than assuming that cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity automatically changes a monocultural national identity, we can ask "How does multiculturalism reinvent 'the nation' over the bodies of strangers? How does the act of 'welcoming the stranger' serve to constitute the nation? How is the 'we' of the nation affirmed through the difference of the 'stranger cultures', rather than against it?" (Ahmed 2000, 95). If, as discussed in the Introduction, the Musée du Quai Branly served as a way for the French state to give full rights of citizenship to the *material objects* of its former colonies, while denying those very same rights to the *people* of its former colonies, this chapter asks, what conditions of welcome do the objects at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration sketch out for the individuals that migrate to France from other countries, particularly the countries that were once part of France's empire? If the MNHI purports to tell a *national* story of immigration, what kind of national social body does it foment, and what must those deemed to be coming from the outside do to belong to it?

This chapter proposes answers to such questions, through an analysis of a few of the migration narratives circulated in, around, or by the MNHI. This analysis will touch on the story of immigration mobilized by State actors when they discuss this museum, as well as the story of immigration told through the curatorial choices in one section of the MNHI's permanent collection in particular, the Gifts Gallery (*la Galerie des dons*). Closely looking at the organization, display, and interpretation of the objects in that gallery will show what this exhibition does to the story of belonging to the French nation. Finally, I will examine a few

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<sup>27</sup> All translations in this chapter, unless alternative bibliographic information is provided, are mine.

individual objects in the Gift Gallery, and investigate what role they play in the museum's narrative of the nation. How do these material objects support, contradict, or denature the story that the MNHI tells? What stories of belonging are enabled by the material objects on display? How do the interactions of the human and nonhuman bodies in the Gifts Gallery shape the thinkable future for a multicultural, multiracial co-habitation of peoples in France?

***The Elephant in the Wall: History of Immigration as History of Nation***

Before turning attention to the curatorial choices and the objects in the museum, it will be helpful to understand what has defined the conditions of the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration existence. I will therefore trace how the MNHI defined its mission—and how its mission was mobilized in national political discourse—at a few key moments in its history. It was a project long in the making, as the proto-life of this museum extends back over fifteen years before its opening. In addition, during its first ten years, it has lived through a series of re-openings and re-structurings. Part of this tumultuous existence is due to its fraught relationship with the state. As a national museum, it is under the tutelage of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. These state departments undergo their own turnover and restructurings as presidents and ministers change, and the MNHI's administrative council ultimately answers to these state actors—and depends on the state for its annual budget.

I mention these tensions because they begin to point to the difficulty that both the state and the museum have experienced in articulating the relationship between immigration and the nation. The tensions also provide context for the at-times contradictory stories of immigration the MNHI portrays.<sup>28</sup> In this chapter, I am limiting my discussion of France's idealized immigration narrative to two speeches given by high-level government officials at significant moments in the

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<sup>28</sup> For more on this see Thomas 2010; Bancel and Blanchard; Aldrich 2005; *Hommes et Migrations* 1267; Blanchard et al.



MNHI's history—even though one could make the case that the tensions palpable in the MNHI's history echo a broader malaise expressed by the country, at all gradients of the political spectrum, in regards to the topic of race, cultural diversity, and national identity. I selected the speeches because they help identify the narrative framework that structures state-sponsored discourse on immigration. In other words, the speeches will shed light on the way the state tells (or wants the museum to tell) the story of immigration in France. I focus on this institutional, public output—official documents, publications, promotional materials—rather than, for example, individual interviews or visitor surveys, because I am interested precisely in what the MNHI, as a state institution, *feels it is allowed to say*.<sup>29</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of having a space dedicated to the history and culture of immigration in Paris had existed since 1989, and was initially floated not by the government but by a small group of historians, human-rights advocates, and local politicians. In 2001, right as Chirac was campaigning for re-election, the immigration museum project piqued the interest of the national government. At that time, the Prime Minister serving during Chirac's first term, Lionel Jospin, commissioned Driss El Yazmin, vice-president of the Human Rights League and representative at large of the immigration research group "Génériques," and Rémy Schwartz, a history professor and adjunct member of the State Council,<sup>30</sup> to conduct a study on the feasibility and interest of such a project. Their report concluded that addressing the history of immigration through a national project would indeed be worthwhile, but left the specifics of such a project up for debate. The report suggested that a national research center could be envisioned, along with a

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<sup>29</sup> As I discuss the goals and missions of the MNHI, whether they are explicitly stated or operating implicitly, I want to acknowledge that this, like all institutions, is made up of individuals. The staff, contributors, and leaders of the MNHI might each position themselves differently in terms of the stated missions of the institution, and their individual histories would likely nuance what the museum says, what it does, and its effects.

<sup>30</sup> Maître du requêtes au Conseil d'Etat.

public museum that might be distributed over a network of sites across the country, or attached to a university campus, or located in a single, independent site.

After his 2002 reelection, Chirac proclaimed that developing a more coherent policy of immigration based on a new politics of integration (“une nouvelle politique d’intégration”) was one of his top priorities. Many saw this as a reaction to the rising political power of the Front National (FN). The 2002 presidential election was the first time that the FN—a party known for its anti-immigrant, anti-minority, and anti-European Union rhetoric and policies, and whose founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was a holocaust denier—had made it to this final round of a presidential election.<sup>31</sup> It was in this context of a new politics of integration that the immigration museum project finally garnered government investment. Chirac’s politics of integration sought a paradoxical outcome: to cast immigration in a more positive light than the extreme right, but also to appease the anti-immigration sentiments of Le Pen’s supporters by reaffirming the importance of the nation’s core identity by making a meticulously calibrated diversity *part* of national identity. This move of including those designated as ‘others’ into the ‘we’ of the nation is why Ahmed insists on the need to “examine multicultural discourses to see how national identity can be established through welcoming (some) strangers” (Ahmed 2000, 16). It is not solely through expulsion and exclusion that nations may reaffirm their identity, but through selective, conditional inclusion.

Chirac appointed former Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon<sup>32</sup> to lead the project of developing a national museum of immigration. The Palais de la Porte Dorée, which sits at the

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<sup>31</sup> The French political system is a multi-party system that has a two-tiered presidential election. In the first round, each party can present one candidate to a popular vote. The two candidates that win the most votes move on to the final round.

<sup>32</sup> Toubon, popularly known as Mr. Allgood (“tout bon” translated into English), was known for his controversial 1994 law mandating that not only all government publications be written in French, but that all advertisements,

East end of Paris's city limits, was chosen as the site for the museum. The Palais is an Art Deco building that had been constructed for the 1931 *Exposition Coloniale Universelle*—a World's Fair that strove to reproduce the diverse riches of France's empire within the space of Paris.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 3 Facade of the MNHI. Photo courtesy of author.

A line of slim rectangular columns stretches across the façade of the building, with a single, massive doorway set in the center, flanked on either side by a series of narrow windows. This creates an imposing panorama and a formal aura to the building. The front courtyard of the Palais is gated, with a single entrance at the center. Visitors thus have no option but to approach

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workplaces, commercial communications and contracts, and government-financed schools use French in all their exchanges and materials.

<sup>33</sup> The slogan of this World Fair was “Around the world in a single day” (*Le tour du monde en un jour*). It included pavilions representing various French colonies that usually displayed agricultural goods and crafts from those lands, large-scale reproductions of indigenous architecture, and, quite often, live performances by colonial subjects that demonstrated either a local ritual or labor practice such as weaving. There is an extensive literature on the colonial fairs, but see Aldrich (2009), Hodeir (2002), and Lindfors (1999) for particularly relevant studies.

the building from the dead center, and climb up a set of steps to reach the arcade and the entrance. The formality of the approach and the classical evocations of the colonnade, without any religious imagery, result in the building resembling a sacred yet secular space: a secular temple, if you will.

The shaded arcade created by the colonnade provides a promenade that one can use to marvel at one of the most striking features of the building: the floor-to-ceiling low-relief sculptures that adorn the exterior walls of the building. Designed by Alfred Janniot, these low-relief sculptures were commissioned by the 1931 *Expo Coloniale*'s director, Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey, who was Marshall of France at the time. The purpose of the façade was to make the wealth of the French empire visible to the *Expo*'s visitors. The wildlife of these lands—elephants, camels, zebras, lions—parade across the upper half of the walls, dominating the scene. The animals all face toward the imposing doorway that sits at the center of the building. The animals thus appear to be marching to the entrance of the building, led by ships crowned with many tiers of sails.

Squeezed in between the wildlife and the windows, “native” people toil in canoes, in agricultural fields, and in mines, demonstrating the diversity of goods and labor that the colonized territories provided for France. The “types” of animals and peoples indigenous to each territory are clustered together, with the name of that territory (e.g. “Maroc”) engraved near the cluster. The effect is both order and abundance; the native flora and fauna, exploited by the indigenous laborers, are classified by region and function as productive groups, but every inch of the sizeable wall is carved, suggesting there was not enough space to represent all of the riches of these lands. Many of the people portrayed carry or fill baskets and other containers with the fruits of their labor, and one can easily imagine that those baskets will fill the ships depicted on

the façade that with swelling sails enter the Palais. Since the low-relief murals sit behind the colonnade, the murals have a curious effect of display and containment. The people and animals are visible from afar, in between the columns. But the columns also appear to be holding in this teeming landscape of natural riches, like the bars of a prison cell.

The Palais de la Porte Dorée was intended to stay open after the fair closed, as the Museum of the Colonies (le Musée permanent du colonies). The Museum of the Colonies' mandate was to exhibit artisanal goods crafted in France's overseas territories and provide geographic and historical information about these lands. In 1932, it changed its name to Museum of the Colonies and Outer France (Musée des colonies et de la France extérieure), and then in 1935 it became The Museum of Overseas France (Musée de la France oute-mer). In 1960, under the influence of André Malraux, a surrealist artist<sup>34</sup> who had been appointed Minister of Culture, it changed its collection focus to art objects, becoming the Museum of African and Oceanic Art (Musée des arts africains et océaniques; MAAO). The natural history, scientific, and ethnographic displays were taken down, though the aquarium, located in the basement, remained. In 1990 it changed names yet again to become the *National* Museum of Art of Africa and Oceania (Musée national de l'art d'Afrique et d'Océanie), but closed 13 years after that, in 2003, when its collection migrated to the Musée du Quai Branly.

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<sup>34</sup> The surrealist in movement in France became, early on, one of the primary advocates for the independence movements of the colonial territories. The leaders of the surrealist movement had close working ties with the founders of the negritude movement, and often used their cultural capital to promote, disseminate, and advocate for contemporary African poets, writers, and artists. During the 1931 Expo Coloniale, two anti-imperialists groups with communist ties, the Comité de la défense de la race nègre (CDRN; previously the Ligue de la Défense de la race nègre founded by Lamine Senghor) and the Vietnamese Comité de la lutte published tracts denouncing the the exhibitions. Many of the members of these groups were arrested to prevent disruptions to the fair. The CDRN, in conjunction with the French section of the international Anti-Imperialist League, and covert help from the Parti communiste français, organized a counter-exhibition called "The Truth About the Colonies" (La vérité sur les colonies). Several Surrealist artists participated by curating the part of the exhibitions that featured arts from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. See Blake 1999 (pp. 133-35) and 2002; Morton (pp. 98-110); Spector (pp. 177-79); Hodeir and Pierre (pp. 125-34); Hodeir, Pierre, and Leprun.

The endless modifications to its name signal the French state's changing relationship to these territories over the 20<sup>th</sup> century: first colonies, then overseas departments, then independent nations. The struggle to *name* these lands, as well as to *categorize* the objects on display inside the museum, as art or as artifacts, mirrors the movement in the relationship between France and the people living in these lands as well: colonial subjects, *indigenat* with partial rights, 'nationals,' assimilated citizens, or, eventually, autonomous citizens of independent nations.<sup>35</sup> The site is hence intimately entwined not only with France's broad colonial history, but with its specific history of appropriation of material objects—agricultural, industrial, and artistic goods—for commerce as well as for exhibition and study. It is also tied with the history of the World Fairs, where the practice of putting humans on display to demonstrate cultural—and in some cases, purportedly biological—differences was prevalent. One would thus hope that a museum, particularly one focused on the movement of people across geographies, would reflect on these earlier practices of circulating, articulating, and displaying cultures and cultural difference through human and nonhuman bodies. The two speeches that inaugurated the MNHI, however, did not employ these histories as a framework for understanding the project. Furthermore, as I will argue in the section on the Gifts Gallery, some of the curatorial practices employed in the MNHI actually *reproduce* the colonial aesthetics of displaying the people and goods of France's overseas empire.

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The first speech to inaugurate the MNHI was given by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin on June 8, 2004. This speech announced to the public the state-sponsored project of

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<sup>35</sup> France developed a complex system of law across its colonies that differentiated between types of subjects, creating inferior legal statuses for the indigenous inhabitants of the territories it had seized. As I will discuss later on, this legal status was, in some cases like in Algeria, directly determined by religion and phenotype.

building the museum of immigration, and revealed that the selected site for the future MNHI was the Palais de la Porte Dorée. To tell the story of the relationship between France as a nation and the history of immigration, Raffarin chose not colonialism as a narrative device, but, instead, the 1790 French Revolution. He describes the revolution as the moment when the then-subjects of the king engaged in a communal project of universal human rights, claiming the status of citizens as that which allowed them to exercise these rights. Raffarin’s language propagates the Republican idea that nationality and citizenship are universal vocations, and eliminate local specificities (2004 [La Révolution a consacré la nation en rompant avec les particularismes locaux]).<sup>36</sup> The 1790 Revolution, then, in narrative that Raffarin mobilizes, is what makes immigration *possible*: it allows any individual, regardless of origin, to claim universal human rights and exercise them through citizenship.

Raffarin, however, conveniently forgets that though in 1794, the National Assembly had indeed decreed that all men (excluding slaves, and women) residing in the colonies were French citizens with full rights, regardless of race, that universal legal status was soon particularized. Napoleon Bonaparte created a separate set of laws to govern the indigenous inhabitants of colonial territories in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, stripping these subjects of citizenship and the rights it entailed. Later, the Indigénat Code—implemented first in Algeria in 1865 and then across the empire in the late 1880s, lasting until 1944—created an inferior legal status for the indigenous inhabitants of the colonies, particularly those of the Muslim faith.<sup>37</sup> Only the inhabitants of the

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<sup>36</sup> Here, Raffarin draws from the idea of Republicanism, a form of governance and national ideology developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (among others) that animated the 1790 revolution and drew the outlines of the modern French Republic. A key tenet of Republicanism is that what unifies the subjects is not a common identity, but that each individual is engaged in a direct relationship with the State.

<sup>37</sup> The earliest version of Indigénat code, created 1965 under Napoleon III, was first applied to the territory of Algeria. These laws made the indigenous inhabitants of the colonies French nationals but not French citizens, they were thus subject to French law (with some recourse to “customary” or religious courts) but without access to the

four oldest townships in French West Africa (located in what today is Senegal) had full citizenship rights, and not until 1915.<sup>38</sup> To put it more explicitly, cultural and geographic origin, gender, religion, and physical appearance were all used to determine whether the inhabitants of France's colonized territories had citizen's rights. Overlooking this history of discriminatory citizenship, Raffarin proclaims nationality and citizenship as universal values on which French identity is founded—and thus, he claims, inclusive of all immigrants.

Raffarin, in other words, declares that because of the French nation's strong belief in these values—which, again, he considers as universal and unifying forces—the immigration museum project will be one that “chooses integration into the nation rather than differentiation between populations” as its guiding editorial line (2004 [Notre exigence de vérité repose sur des convictions fortes: nous avons fait le choix de l'intégration à la nation plutôt que la différenciation des populations]). The nation, therefore, and national identity, operate at the center of Raffarin's vision for the museum of immigration—and immigration at large. Raffarin furthermore defines a French person as “a citizen that takes part in these values, that believes in universality, and who thinks and reasons in our language—our language as it is the very vector of our civilization and that is why we cling to it dearly” (2004 [Un Français aujourd'hui, c'est un citoyen qui a en partage ces valeurs, qui croit en l'universel et qui pense et raisonne dans notre langue, notre langue qui est le vecteur même de notre civilisation et c'est pour cela que nous y

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same rights as French citizens. The Indigénat code also affected land rights, imposed special taxes and duties, and made forced labor possible. Though some modifications were made, the Indigénat code was not abolished until 1946. From Joan Wallach Scott's *The Politics of the Veil*: “In 1870, citizenship was extended to Algerian Jews, though Jews were already considered French nationals in the metropole. In the hierarchy of social distinction, Jew ranked below Christian Europeans and native French, but above the Muslims (both Arab and Berber), who were the real subject people, those with no vote and no right of representation. Berbers, however, were considered superior to Arab because it was said that their belief in private property, their commerce and family law, as well as their European looks (red or blonde hair, blue eyes), made them more likely to assimilate to European ways” (48)

<sup>38</sup> One of the rights gained by this citizenship status in the four communes was the right to serve in the French Army. In some iterations of the code, in other territories, it was possible to apply for French citizenship, though in Algeria it required giving up their Muslim status and right to be tried in religious court.



tenons tant]). So though Raffarin claims French national identity is based on the ideal of citizenship as *universal* a mode of being, which everyone thus has access to, he describes a curiously culturally *particular* way of being a citizen.

In the end, Raffarin's vision, the 'universal' story of immigration is the story of arriving at a *local* identity—in other words, immigration is tantamount to becoming French. However, becoming French requires certain conditions of thinking, reasoning, and being in the world, given that, according to Raffarin, being French means adhering to a particular humanist ideology, believing that that ideology is universally applicable, and structuring one thinking and reasoning through the French language. In short, he espouses a narrative of modern liberalism, which can be understood as “the branches of European political philosophy that include the narration of political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange markets, and the conferring of civilization to human persons educated in aesthetic and national culture—in each case unifying particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community” (Lowe 3-4). As Lowe suggests in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, such narratives hide the practices of enslavement, displacement, and exploitation that were made possible through that very promise of freedom and consciousness. We see this in the remainder of Raffarin's speech.

After his opening statements which set up French citizenship—and the modes of being it entails—as the destination point of immigration, Raffarin then given a brief overview of immigration with the intent of showing how successfully such an integration into Frenchness has worked in the past. He names the major waves of European immigrants according to their origin (the Polish, the Belgians, the Spanish, the Italians). He then briefly mentions the soldiers from the colonial territories that fought and died in the World Wars, saying he pays his respects to

them. He then cites the North and West African immigrants that came—because they were actively recruited by factories that needed manual laborers, he neglects to say—to France after World War II, and notes that they were largely responsible for rebuilding the infrastructure of the nation. He mentions their difficult living conditions, and thanks them for their labor. He concludes his historical overview by saying that all of these immigrants have greatly contributed to France’s national project.

Raffarin says little else in reference to colonial history. He alludes briefly to the elephant in the room—the history of the Palais de la Porte Dorée as a colonial museum—and says, simply, that “Colonization and immigration are evidently tied, even if immigration started long before colonization and accelerated its pace after decolonization” (2004; [La colonisation et l’immigration ont des liens évidents, meme si l’immigration avait commence bien avant la colonization et qu’elle s’est accélérée après la decolonization]). Raffarin does not bother to expound on these evident ties, nor does he acknowledge that the immigration that took place was not only from other lands to France, but from France to the colonial territories, with French citizens sent to the territories to occupy and govern the land, to manage local labor forces, and to decide and enforce who had access to, and to what degree, those “universal” rights of citizenship.

Moreover, Raffarin does not mention that in this inverse movement of French people going to territories in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, they did not find it necessary to contribute to the social and cultural projects of the people they invaded, but rather imposed the social structures and cultural norms of the metropole. In a startling show of near-sightedness, Raffarin fails to realize that his discourse on immigration reproduces the imperial logic of assimilation that guided the French colonial project. The *mission civilisatrice*, as it was called during and after the French Empire, claimed that its goal was to “civilize,” through labor,

education in the French curriculum, and language acquisition, the indigenous inhabitants of their colonies in order to eventually produce African (or Asian, or Arab) *Frenchmen*, identical to the inhabitants of metropolitan France (even though not necessarily holding equal rights). The goal, apparently, has not changed, only the location: now the subjects of the former colonies come to France and the *mission civilisatrice* takes place there.

Raffarin's speech was the only one by a major state actor to inaugurate or acknowledge the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration until its rededication by President François Hollande in 2014.<sup>39</sup> I will highlight just a few elements from Hollande's speech in 2014 to show what stayed the same and what changed in the national discourse and attitude toward immigration during those ten years. While Hollande—who was the Socialist Party (*Parti Socialist*, PS) candidate—addresses much more explicitly and critically the history of colonization and its violence, and does describe and condemn present-day racism and Islamophobia, the idea and ideals of the nation remain at the heart of his speech.

Hollande opens, much like Raffarin did, by saying that the history of immigration is the history of the nation: “To address the history of immigration, is to address France's history: it is history, our history” (2014 [Evoquer l'histoire d'immigration, c'est évoquer l'histoire de France, c'est l'histoire, c'est notre histoire]). In that sense, he uses a similar reasoning as Raffarin: we care about immigration's history because it teaches “us”—those who are already French—about “our” nation. Like Raffarin, Hollande also speaks of being French as “not tied to one's origins,

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<sup>39</sup> When the MNHI opened in October 2007, President Sarkozy did not attend, nor did he attend the inauguration of its media library and new exhibition spaces in 2009. His absence was taken by the press to signal a dismissal of the project as unnecessary—this is the president that, in 2005, as minister of the Interior, defended the law that pressed school curriculum to emphasize the positive outcomes of colonialism. It was likewise taken to signal his disapproval of the leadership of the project, since most of the scientific committee resigned before the museum opened, as a protest of Sarkozy's impending new laws on immigration. A common phrase in the media was that the MNHI was the museum “snubbed by Sarkozy” (boudé par Sarkozy).

but to one's adhesion to a common project" (2014 [depuis 150 ans, la République n'est pas liée aux origines, c'est l'adhésion à un projet commun]). However, Hollande alludes not the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but a speech by philosopher Ernest Renan in 1882 in which Renan spoke against an essentialist national identity tied to race and religion, advocating instead national identity as a conscious, collective choice, with individual rights and responsibilities.

In the vision of the nation and national identity that Hollande outlines, though still coming out of a French tradition of thought, we can see a conscious effort to make space for a diversity of traditions, ideologies, and experiences. The space of possibility for these other traditions, ideologies, and experiences, however, are shaped by unavowed conditions.<sup>40</sup> Hollande stresses that the nation must "answer the question of immigration in a Republican way" (2014 [traiter d'une façon républicaine la question de l'immigration]). Integration remains the desired outcome, and Republicanism is once again treated as a universal vocation. The vector for integration, in Hollande's speech, is not the French language or a religious or cultural tradition, but secularism (*laïcité*).<sup>41</sup>

In fact, Hollande posits that it is the very belief in the ideal of the Republic and the ideal of secularism that *makes immigration possible* in France. Republicanism because, according to Hollande, it unifies by providing a common project that does depend on a particularized identity, and *laïcité* because it is "the freedom to believe or not. [...] [*laïcité*] is what allows us know, in

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<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as Aimé Césaire notes in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (*Discours sur le colonialisme*), while advocating for a national unity forged through the recognition of individual rights and their engagement towards a collective good, Renan nevertheless claimed that not all races were made equal. In *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, Renan argues that some races were destined for subservience—that, in fact, part of Europe's great collective project ought to be the mastery of these lesser races (the Chinese and the "Negroes"). See pages 37-38.

<sup>41</sup> As J. Scott notes, there are differences between (American) secularism and French *laïcité*. *laïcité* refers not simply to a separation between church and state but to the role of the state in protecting individuals from the claims of religion. It further rests on the notion that the secular and the sacred can be divided in the lives of individuals" (97-8). I am translating *laïcité* as secularism in this chapter and will use the two interchangeable as I will not be making extensive comparisons between the two nor discuss secularism in other countries in any detail.

our actions of everyday life, what we can do and what we are not allowed to show or do” (2014 [la liberté de croire ou de ne pas croire. [...] ce qui permet dans les actes de la vie quotidienne de savoir ce qu'il est possible de faire et ce qu'il n'est pas possible de montrer ou de faire]). Laïcité is celebrated as a practice of freedom: there is no state religion and everyone is free to claim a faith or not. In essence, Hollande suggests laïcité functions as the traffic rules on a public street: anyone can enter the space and use it to circulate through the city, as long as they follow the rules of the road. These rules, because they apply to all and do not make exception for any religion, are considered to be culturally neutral.

However, typically, laïcité requires that no visible signs of religious affiliation or practice be brought into public space. One has the freedom to practice one’s religion in the privacy of one’s home or in the space of a religious institution, but not in public; it assumes, then, a way of being that divides public and private selves. Thus, the problem is that in proposing Republicanism and laïcité as a way out of particularized identities *in theory*, Hollande assumes that these two principles are divorced of identity politics *in practice*. The theory and practice of laïcité gets played out in public spaces, and as the rules are established they reveal themselves to be culturally conditioned, as the burkini ban examples from the summer of 2016 illustrate. Following a rise of Daesh-related terrorist attacks in France, twenty-six towns instated an explicit ban, enforced with fines, for women who wore “burkinis,” the full body swimsuits associated with Islamic clothing practices, to the public beach.<sup>42</sup> In addition to imposing fines, the bans led to some police officers escorting women off the beach or, on a few occasions, forcing them to remove some of their clothing, even women that were not wearing a burkini but rather leggings, a tunic, and head-scarf. The burkini and the modest clothing paired with a head scarf were

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<sup>42</sup> The incident that inspired this flurry of legislation was the Bastille Day attack in Nice, in which a man claiming ties to ISIS drove a cargo truck into the beach front crowds killing 84 people and injuring several hundred.

banned, according to the municipalities, because they were “ostentatious signs of religious affiliation” and thus violated the secular mandate to keep religious signs and practices in private spaces and not incite public disorder.

Laïcité is seen as universal and non-discriminatory because in theory, no one is allowed to wear signs of religious affiliation. However, in determining what is customary clothing and what is religious clothing, laïcité becomes particularized. Wearing a swimsuit is decreed as the proper, secular clothing for enjoying the beach. But that clothing practice, in general, corresponds with or at the very least does not compromise the religious or philosophical values of, for example, a mainstream Catholic or an atheist. It does, however, compromise for some people of the Muslim faith, their religious practice. Following this rule for one religious group does not interfere with the exercise of their faith, but it might for another one.<sup>43</sup> As Joan Wallach Scott demonstrates in *The Politics of the Veil*, the flurry of legislation determining proper use of the headscarf exemplifies the way “French norms of sexual conduct [were] taken to be both natural and universal. [...] It was also a way of insisting on the superiority of French gender relations, indeed, of associating them with higher forms of civilization” (8, 16). Perhaps more troubling is that it is not just the *theory* of laïcité that is entwined with particularized cultural practices, but its *enforcement*. What made the modest clothing that the women wore on the beach *religious* clothing, and not just the clothing of someone shielding themselves from the sun, or uncomfortable with the full exposure that a bikini offers—or, moreover, a non-religious cultural

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<sup>43</sup> My argument is most certainly *not* that a professing a faith should give one person or group rights over another person or over society at large, nor that faith-based arguments should be used for granting exceptions to the rules and responsibilities that apply to the social body at large. What I want to highlight is the way the language of rights is shaped by cultural biases. These biases must not be ignored. We must examine how they intersect with the power dynamics of social relations if we want to ensure that particular social groups, especially those that have been historically marginalized, are not systematically excluded from operating with the same kinds of freedoms in social space. Pages 93-97 in Scott’s *Politics of the Veil* provide an insightful discussion of the nuances in accommodating religious claims within a secularist framework.

expression? How do the police offices decide who to fine? Would a nun in her habit, or a Tibetan monk in robes, be also asked to strip down to a swimsuit and briefs? And if *laïcité* is universal, why is it that only *women's* bodies required policing through the burkini ban? Just as Raffarin's claim that citizenship is a universally-accessible mode of belonging becomes dubious when France's history of discriminatory citizenship is traced, so too does Hollande's claim that *laïcité* can equitably unify people of all cultural and religious backgrounds start to crumble when pressed.

In essence, the parallel that I want to make between the two speeches is that, in addition to their continuation of the imperial logic of the *mission civilisatrice*, they both assume that in the process of immigration, the nation acts as a stable and neutral common ground that each individual is equally able to enter. Immigration brings new people *into* the nation who are then *shaped* by the nation, and these newcomers do not make the rules, they abide by them. Immigration, in this vision, is also a universal process: all immigrants are seen as equally able to be shaped by and fit into the nation, and this process is seen as entailing no violence. Certainly, Hollande points to version of the nation in which newcomers might be able to “keep” their language or religion—but only as long as it does not interfere with the “common project” of the nation. Like the indigenous laborer depicted on the walls of the building that houses the museum, immigrants can “enrich” the national body, but they do not get to decide what the contours and boundaries of that common project could be.

Hollande and Raffarin's vision of the nation may contain some differences, but overall, their speeches cast the story of immigration as a plotline whose final destination is identification with pre-existing national values. They justify this plot structure with an implicit “host” vs. “guest” logic, which I will argue is likewise operating in the Gifts Gallery. I will give more

examples of this host vs. guest logic in the gallery space and in Hollande's speech later on, and discuss the limitations that this logic imposes on the creation of a common ground—a common project—that could lead to equitable and peaceful collective living. In order to get to that, we need to look at the MNHI, its space, its curation, and its human and nonhuman material bodies.

### ***Immigration as Arrival Plot in the Gifts Gallery***

The Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration has three exhibition spaces: the permanent exhibit, *Waypoints* (Repères); a temporary space that hosts roughly two new exhibitions per year; and the permanent Gifts Gallery (Galerie des dons). It also has a media library and a screening room, and a robust website that makes accessible much of the materials from the permanent exhibitions. *Waypoints* uses archival materials, didactic documents, and art objects clustered around ten themes—such as “Facing the State,” “At Work,” “Religion”—to outline two centuries of immigration to France. The overall approach leans towards the historic, both in its development of immigration as a longstanding phenomenon, the kinds of materials it uses in its exhibitions, its chronological organization, and its emphasis on the importance of commemoration and memory. I mention this exhibition to give a sense of the museum's overall approach to immigration and its museological methods. However, this chapter will be focusing on the smaller Gifts Gallery, which was opened in 2008, one year after the original opening of the museum.

The objects on display in the Gifts Gallery, as its name suggests, have been donated to the museum. The donors are immigrants and descendants of immigrants, and the objects tend to be humble objects, the kinds of things that would live in the intimacy of the home, or be used on a daily basis for work. I have chosen this particular exhibition space for two reasons. First, because the intimate relationship between people and objects is one of the vectors through which the poetics of migration is explored in this dissertation. The material objects in the Gifts Gallery



speak to such relations, given that they were invited into the museum precisely because they once were an intimate part of individual immigrants' lives. Secondly, it is one of the spaces where individual ways of telling the story of migration cohabit with the curatorial voice of the museum, since the objects are accompanied by lengthy text labels that tell their donors' stories, often through direct quotations from the donors' first-person narrative. Of course, curation is still part of the process, as the museum workers select and edit the stories, and arrange the display of the objects in the gallery. Nevertheless, it is a space in the museum where the divergences and convergences of an individual immigrant story and a national story of immigration might be more visible. I will begin with the curatorial aspects before delving into the ways in which these intimate material objects might tell a their own story of immigration.

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Luc Gruson, the director of the ensemble of the MNHI, states in the catalogue that the goal for this gallery was to tell the story of integration “not from the perspective of the host society, as it is too often happens in public policies, but from the view “on the ground,” from the point of view of those who were taken in and became integrated” (Gruson 7 [non pas du point de vue de la société d'accueil comme le font trop souvent les politique publiques, mais plutôt par « le bas », du point du vue de ceux qui ont été accueillis est se sont intégrés]). The head of collections, Hélène du Mazaubrun, describes the creation of the gallery as a participative process. Both of these museum staff members speak of the objects in the Gifts Gallery as bearing witness to intimate stories, related to the family and the private home space. Gruson speaks of this section as the “repères intimes” (intimate references) to flesh out the “repères de l’histoire” (historic references) of the main exhibit.

The design of the display cases, however, flattens the three-dimensional dynamic objects into a pictorial surface. The objects are sheltered behind floor-to-ceiling glass vitrines that are partially painted over with text or abstract forms.



Figure 4 Gifts Gallery. Photo courtesy of author.

This non-transparent decoration outlines the spaces through which one can see the objects, creating a kind of frame a mural collage. Though the decorative motifs clearly had organizational purposes (creating thematic clusters of objects and hiding the empty space), their aqueous color scheme with rippling lines recalls the aquarium on the basement floor of the MNHI's building.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> There are relatively few objects in proportion to display space, and I suspect that hiding the empty space was another motivating factor for this peculiar museography. The objects are clustered into the viewable portion, making the display cases seem full. The window-like effect remains, even if not the primary or sole intention, but I note the emptiness as it speaks to the difficulty the museum had in assembling exhibits without a starter collection—and the only moderately-successful recruitment of immigrant donors.

It is difficult not to think of these cases as fishbowls rather than windows, and in that case the effect is more of confinement—and brings to mind the low-relief sculptures on the façade outside, in that they express both a dimensionality and a flatness at the same time, and are set up into a kind of wall mural that the visitor experiences by walking alongside it.

Furthermore, the material objects are accompanied by labels that speak not just to the individual donor's story of immigration, but to the principal waves of immigration from the donor's place of origin. The chef's uniform donated by Rougi Dia thus has a label that tells of her journey to France and success in the culinary world, but a second label in the display case tells of Senegalese immigration to France. The macro-histories do at times point to the entanglements of migration, colonialism, and state-sponsored displacements that Raffarin and Hollande's speeches elided. Nevertheless, the arranging of the material objects by place of origin reproduces, once again, the arrangement of the colonies depicted on the façade of the Palais. This is all the more jarring given that the names of the colonial territories and the names of the independent nation states have often remained the same. Thus, most of the places named on the façade also appear on the walls Gallery—though the Gallery names some that are not on the façade (e.g. Italy, Argentina)—creating an uncanny double of the low-relief mural.

In essence, what I am suggesting is both the inauguration speeches *and* the Gifts Gallery inside the MNHI appear to operate through the narrative logic of the colonial mission that was etched on the façade of the Palais: the (economic and cultural) contributions of peoples outside of France is rewarded by status as a French subject and access to the freedoms that it promises. Indeed, the curatorial framing in the catalogue and website suggest that what is meaningful about these individual donations to the Gifts Gallery is that they, collectively, contribute to a national history. The presentation on the website claims that “Incorporated into the Museum, the objects

[in the Gifts Gallery] which previously were *mere* family mementos—identity papers, expired work contracts, personal archives—join the ranks of “testimonial” objects that bear witness to immigration in France” (MNHI [Intégrés au Musée, les objets qui n’étaient jusque-là que des souvenirs de famille, des papiers d’identité, des contrats de travail périmés, des archives personnelles viennent grossir le rang des objets “témoins” de l’immigration en France] translation and italics mine). What has earned these objects a place in the museum is not the singularity of their previous owners, not their “mere” family histories, but their collective participation in France’s history. Once again, the notion of contributing to the nation appears at the heart of the immigration story the museum has set out to tell.

The Gifts Gallery, I contend, spatializes this narrative of contribution, outlining the steps one must take to be able to belong to the French nation and exercise the rights of citizenship. The exhibition space is a balcony gallery, on the third story of the museum, overlooking the open auditorium on the ground floor. The displays are set along the four narrow balcony corridors, forming a square around the open auditorium below.



Figure 5 Installation shot, Gifts Gallery corridor. Photo courtesy of author.

At each corner, the title theme is painted onto the wall. These four themes are: *Inherit, Share, Contribute, Accept* (Hériter, Partager, Contribuer, Accepter).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In my many visits to the exhibition space, it was never clear to me whether the objects in proximity to each theme were supposed to demonstrate that action in particular. Upon reading the catalogue, it was revealed that for the curator, the thematic actions did serve as organizational categories. The area by To Inherit displays objects that were given by the child or grandchild of the original donor; To Share displays objects that speak to a cultural or ethnic tradition; To Contribute shows objects that demonstrate how the donors participated in the evolution of France, through labor, military service, or civic engagement; To Accept displays the objects that speak to a multicultural identity in the construction of the donor's life story. These categories, by not means clear-cut, also overlap, as there are inherited objects, for example, that appear in other sections.



Figure 6 Exhibition themes at the MNHI. Photo courtesy of author.

It is striking that the museum chose to set the themes as verbs, rather than nouns—why not “Heritage” rather than “Inherit”? Also striking is the use of infinitive; the unconjugated verb seems to lend an undetermined quality to the themes. Who has, or will, or is, sharing? Or is it a command, since in French the infinitive can function as imperative when writing step-by-step instructions, such as in a recipe? If so, who is it that *must* inherit, and what?

Short descriptions accompany the four themes, completing the sentence fragments, and a close reading will provide some clues as to who is the imagined subject of the actions. By *Inherit*, the description reads: “a family history and understand one’s roots through the past” [Hériter d’une histoire familiale et comprendre ses racines à travers le passé]. This implies that whoever is inheriting cannot understand their roots through the present. Furthermore, it suggests that this understanding will come through the exploration of not just any history, but a *family*

history. Similarly, *Share* is completed by “one’s traditions and culture in the midst of a family, a community, or with society” [Partager ses traditions et sa culture au sein d’une famille, d’une communauté ou avec la société]. Here, there seems to be an assumed division between “family” and “community,” both which are particularized (*une famille, une communauté*) and “society” (*la société*), which seems to be universal and does not have the same culture as the “family” or “community” (otherwise, they wouldn’t need the culture shared with them). The other themes, which I will explore later, have a similar construction, in which it appears that the individual that is—or *should* be—performing these actions is not the imagined average national subject, but the idealized immigrant.

Once we have established that the subject of the actions in the gifts gallery is the imagined immigrant, we can interpret the thematic actions in the gallery as the steps the MNHI believes the immigrant must take to integrate, in order to create a perfect multicultural soufflé. The choice of the infinitive as the verb tense compounds this effect, given that in French, the infinitive is the administrative imperative—it is precisely the verb tense that immigrants confront as they go through the visa processing and all their other interactions with state institutions. Moreover, because the displays are set in a balcony space rather than an open room, visitors cannot wander from one theme to another at will; there is a discrete order to follow. Visitors must encounter the themes in sequence starting with *Inherit* and ending at *Accept* (though they can, of course, choose to skip over, stop, or turn back).<sup>46</sup> Though each of the fifty-plus donors of

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<sup>46</sup> When one enters the balcony gallery, one can turn right, towards *Inherit* or left towards *Accept*. It is thus possible to follow the sequence backwards, starting with “to Accept” and ending with “to Inherit,” as I did in my first several visits. The catalogue, however, clearly states the intended order of the themes, and spatially, it encourages visitors to follow it by placing the “proper” beginning (*Inherit*) on the right, the direction most visitors turn to when entering exhibition spaces.

the objects in the Gifts Gallery collection had a unique migration trajectory, the curatorial organization suggests that *upon arrival*, all immigrants will (should) follow the same path.

Each of the four thematic actions then, function as moments in the MNHI's idealized journey of migration, with integration as the endpoint. The first two, *Inherit* and *Share*, center on the family, while the next two shift the focus to "society"—to the host nation, in this case, France. It appears that for the MNHI, the narrative of migration is a journey of shifting allegiance from the family to the nation. Furthermore, the first two steps suggest that while the immigrant *inherits*—it its their inalienable property with a mandate to pass it down genealogically—a particularized past, traditions, and cultures, these elements ought to be *shared* with—not given to—the larger social body. An odd tension simmers underneath the mandate to share. The museum wishes to display the cultural heritage of the immigrant donors, but the sharing rhetoric hints at a fear that this cultural heritage might become cultural baggage that will clutter up the house if the imagined immigrants make themselves *too* much at home.

If cultural heritage, in the implicit migration narrative at the MNHI, is more of a temporary loan to the nation than a permanent offering, what *are* the gifts hinted at in the name of the Gifts Gallery? The answer lies in the final two thematic actions, which shed some light on the gifts the imagined immigrant is expected to offer. The third thematic action in the gallery is to *Contribute* "to the History of a nation and participate through labor, through military service, or through collective civic engagement" [à l'Histoire d'une nation et intervenir par le travail, les armes, ou les luttes collectives]. In other words, the proper way to contribute is to participate in existing civic engagements. Finally, the last step is *Accept* "the complexity of individual histories and to envision one's future in a collective lifestyle" [la complexité des histoires singulières et envisager son avenir dans un vivre ensemble]. If the past belonged to the family or a particular



community, it appears that the act of sharing is the first step to engagement in the present, and this sharing will lead to investing in the future of the nation. Intimacy and singularity, by the end of the journey, are replaced by a civic-minded collective engagement performed in the public space.

As a result of this narrative structure, a peculiar temporal and spatial plot organize this imagined immigrant journey. The temporal sequence (first you accept, then you share, etc) *also* implies a temporal reorientation, from looking back, towards the past, to looking around, at the present, to looking forward, towards the future. A spatial reorientation matches the temporal reorientation. This reorientations refers not only to the geographic journey that brought the immigrant to the French soil. Rather, the immigrant journey proposed by the Gifts Gallery also involves a shift from the intimate space of the private home, to the public space of civic engagement and society. The logical endpoint, for the MNHI, of the temporal and spatial plots of the immigration narrative is thus participation in French society—more precisely, inhabiting public space in a way that exemplifies French national values.

When describing the final section of the Gifts Gallery, *Accept*, du Mazaubrun describes it as the section with objects that embody the moment the immigrant donors accepted that “there would be no return. This is the realization that allows him or her to settle into the present and the future of the host nation” ([il n’y aura pas de retour, ce qui lui permet de s’ancrer dans le present et l’avenir de son pays d’accueil]). Du Mazaubrun uses the term *pays d’accueil*, which means host nation, but “accueil” also translates as “welcome.” The happy ending the Gifts Gallery imagines is one in which the “home culture” of the immigrants is relegated to the past and to the private space of the home, only welcomed into the public when it can be put into service for a greater national good of their host nation.

The Gifts Gallery, in fact, not only *describes* this as the proper immigration process, it *enacts* it. When the immigrant donors give their personal objects to the museum, they allow France “to endow itself with a national collection, part of the “common goods” (du Mazaubrun 8; [de se doter d’une collection nationale, incorporée au “bien commun”]). In France, the collections held in national museums (with the designation “musée de France”) do not belong to the institution that exhibits them, but rather to the state itself. All acquisitions, deaccessions, and changes to the collection must undergo an approval process through the National Office of Patrimony that is part of the Ministry of Culture. The objects given to the Gifts Gallery collection thus literally become State property. Interestingly, when the Gifts Gallery first opened, the objects were taken in as loans. A few years later, the museum decided to change their status to donations. Though the curators celebrate this decision as a gesture of honor, giving the objects due respect in consecrating them as national patrimony, I wonder how keeping them as loans might have emphasized the agency of the givers and the individual, fragmented nature of their migration stories. Instead, what was part of a family heritage becomes part of the national patrimony, serving the social body of France by allowing the museum to fulfill its mission of incorporating the history of immigration into national history, turning multiculturalism into one of the republican values of France. This process of giving to the nation is ongoing, as an empty display case near the exit announces: “This display case can hold your future gifts and narrative”

([Cette vitrine peut recevoir vos prochains dons et récits]).



Figure 7 Empty Display case, Left, and Close-up of Label. Photos courtesy of author.

### ***The Logic of Hospitality in Migration Narratives***

I propose that the logic operating in this migration narrative is the logic of host and guest. The nation, its society, are the protagonists, that play the role of the gracious hosts that welcome the immigrant guest into a home. The immigrant, like any good guest, comes bearing gifts. Indeed, the speech given by President Hollande at the MNHI's re-inauguration in 2014 that I analyzed earlier in this chapter also operates under a hospitality logic. Hollande, when speaking about the museum's collection, declares: "I thank the donors, who, through a musical instrument, a machine, a piece of fabric, have made it possible to illustrate their attachment to France as well as to their home country. It is as if the home countries came here to offer themselves up to the host country, that is to say, to France" (Hollande 2014 [Je remercie les donateurs qui ont fait en sorte de pouvoir par un instrument de musique, une machine, une étoffe, démontrer le lien qu'ils avaient avec la France et aussi leur pays d'origine. Comme si le pays d'origine venait ici s'offrir au pays d'accueil, c'est-à-dire la France]). This rhetoric casts as laudable—normal, even—that the immigrant guests offer themselves up to the host country. And Hollande, as head of State, can be seen here as modeling the proper behavior of the host citizens: they should accept, with gratitude, the gifts of their immigrant guests.

Why does pointing out the hospitality rhetoric of the immigration narrative in the Gifts Gallery (and in popular discourse on immigration) matter? In fact, wouldn't it be a good thing if France welcomes immigrants, gives them a home, and is grateful for what they bring to the nation? The problem is that the language and metaphors of hospitality imply particular relations between parties (the hosts and guests). While these relations at first glance may appear to favor inclusion, generosity, and acceptance, they also set in motion certain expectations, responsibilities, and hierarchies. When the logic of hospitality is mapped onto immigration policy and practice, the outcome is subtly pernicious. Mireille Rosello's *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* draws a comprehensive study of the language and logic of hospitality in the discourse on immigration in France through the 1990s. I will not summarize her extensive findings here, but do agree with her conclusion that the problem with the hospitality narrative in immigration discourse is that it provides an illusion of welcome while legitimizing and codifying persistent inequalities.

In essence, hospitality logic gives the host a reason to believe the home is inviting, while enabling those pesky relations of power to remain operational, they have merely been swept under the rug. For example, a host may welcome a guest, but the home, its rules, remain in the hands of the host. The guest, meanwhile, inhabits an inherently precarious role, for even though a "good" host will tell their guests to settle in, a guest always risks overstaying a welcome, or making themselves *too much* at home. Of course, the host, as Jacques Derrida elaborates in his study of the politics of hospitality, runs the risk of the duties and obligations of hospitality taking him or her hostage.<sup>47</sup> The host is expected to provide certain comforts for the guest, and in the ideal of unconditional hospitality, a host gives up their place for the guest. This possible

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<sup>47</sup> See Derrida (2000), especially pages 123-127.

substitution of roles between guest and host is suggested in the very language, as in French “hôte” refers both to a host or a guest. What is important to note is that in all of these possible scenarios of hospitality, the host and the guest inhabit the same space, but their experience of the space is not conditioned by the same expectations. The veneer of hospitality can normalize these expectations, as the guest can be decried as ungrateful if they refuse or criticize the expectations or point out the discomforts of the situation. Likewise, the inconveniences the host experiences can be praised as examples of self-sacrifice, while the privileges the hosts enjoy can be normalized and rendered invisible.

The point, then, is not that being a host and being a guest is risky business, but rather that the logic of hospitality as the structural force of a state-sponsored narrative of migration *masks* the conditions of welcome. Hospitality distracts, in other words, from the renegotiation of rights that takes place under the veneer of hospitality. Indeed, we can parse out the conditions of welcome in migration narrative in the Gifts Gallery, which ends with “Accept the complexity of individual histories and to envision one’s future in a collective lifestyle.” The acceptance step of the immigrant plot endorses a celebration of the multicultural diversity, and even appears to also apply to the host citizens. The host citizens, like the immigrants, need to imagining themselves in a collective national lifestyle that includes diverse individual stories. However, as I suggested before, “multiculturalism can involve a double and contradictory process of incorporation and expulsion: it may seek to differentiate between those strangers whose appearance of difference can be claimed by the nation, and those stranger strangers who may yet be expelled, whose difference may be dangerous to even the most heterogeneous of nations” (Ahmed 2000, 97). When we think back to the plot in the Gifts Gallery that moves through the four distinct steps of *Inherit, Share, Contribute* and *Accept*, it appears that a welcome into the public sphere is given

once the diversity of cultural heritage is relegated to the private sphere of the family, and the imagined immigrant enters the public space as an inconspicuous member of the common project of the Republic.

Thus, the migrant narrative plotted out by the Gifts Gallery suggest a process of differentiation, wherein the cultural diversity of the imagined immigrants is accepted when it contributes the pre-existing civic project—when it enables, that is to say, a particularly French way being a citizen. In other words, when we take Hollande’s and Raffarin’s speeches alongside the curatorial choices of the Gifts Gallery, the conditions of acceptance—of *welcome*, really—in France appear to correlate with how smoothly the non-French cultural practices of the immigrant guests can be folded into the principles of Republicanism in general and *laïcité* in particular. These, as I demonstrated earlier, are principles that are culturally particular, not universal—or, as Joan Wallach Scott puts it, “it is a universalism that is particularly French” (11-12). Moreover, this French way of being universal is shaped out of the historical context of imperialism. In Lowe’s words, “The social inequalities of our time are a legacy of these processes through which ‘the human’ is ‘freed’ by liberal forms, while other subjects, practices, and geographies are placed at a distance from ‘the human’” (2). If the gifts the immigrant guests give brush against these principles or question their universality, their right to claim belonging is met with hostility rather than hospitality, as we saw in the case of the burkini ban on public beaches.

In positioning the nation of France as a home whose doors are open to all, the narrative overlooks how the threshold of the home is monitored, preventing some from even reaching the open door. For those that do step through, the “making themselves at home” by adopting the customary laws of the nation requires a modification of their previous modes of being, a process which may entail varying amounts of adaptation and may be experienced as—or enforced with—

varying levels of physical, semantic, or affective violence. However, if the language of hospitality masks the conditions of welcome and normalize the hosts' privilege, it can also be recruited to reveal and interrogate those conditions. It can be used to pose questions creatively, that shift the ethical frame of immigration. For example, we can ask who are the guests of honor in the context of immigration, and who is asked to leave? Can the "guest" become a "host," and how so? What would that look like? What happens to the host and the home? Can a guest invite other guests? What if the guest wants to leave? What rights can the children of the guests exercise? In the following section, I will analyze some of the objects in the Gifts Gallery to see how these material bodies contribute to how process of making oneself at home. My goal is to trace how the semantic and material properties of objects, and their relationship with their immigrant donors, intervene in the narrative of migration proposed by the MNHI. I suspect that the objects will deviate from the temporal and spatial plots laid out by the MNHI's narrative, and challenge some of the hospitable assumptions that undergird it.

### ***Objects as Narrative Agents in the Gifts Gallery Migration Plot***

So far, in this chapter, I have parsed out some the curatorial choices in the Gifts Gallery to identify the rhetorical elements and narrative effects of the story of migration that the MNHI tells. I have informed my reading of the museum's story of migration with the speeches of President Hollande and Prime Minister Raffarin, as they enable us to identify the overarching narrative frameworks that currently structure discourse on migration in France. I have argued that these frameworks, and the narrative effects of the curatorial choices in the Gifts Gallery, propose a story of migration that make the host nation the protagonist and casts the immigrants in the role of guests, who must integrate into the host nation by exercising the national values of the Republic. This story poses problems. One of them being that the plotline of migration narrative enables a differentiation of cultural differences, wherein only the differences that can

be recruited to serve the common project of the nation are welcomed as truly belonging. Due to this, I have suggested that this plotline perpetuates—even exacerbates—historically unequal relations of power between France and its immigrant “guests,” perhaps in particular those “guests” coming from the territories France exploited through colonization.

However, to suggest that the curatorial choices produce a monolithic narrative would overlook the unruly power of material narration. And to presume that the narrative frameworks on immigration that dominate political and popular discourse irreparably disable imaginative story telling would be likewise shortsighted. In this final section of the chapter, I will discuss some moments in the Gifts Gallery where the logic of hospitality does not structure the plot. In other words, I will ask point to the moments where the guest or the host step out of the bounds of their roles, demonstrating how the human and nonhuman material bodies and the individual migrant narratives act on and against the immigration plot set out by the museum that whose happy ending remains an exclusionary integration?

I will look at three gifts, and the narrative labels written by their immigrant donors, that stray out of the prescribed narrative and change the spatial and temporal emplotment of the storyline. I will suggest that these objects and their stories narrate against the grain of the dominant migration plotline proposed by the museum. This acting on the dominant narrative was not necessarily a curatorial intention—the museum may not even be aware of the ways these elements deviate from the overall storyline—but the choice to include direct quotations from the immigrant donors does open up this space of nuancing. I would even imagine that this nuance was a desired outcome.<sup>48</sup> The donors that give their objects and share the story likewise may or

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<sup>48</sup> Though I maintain that the overall framing of the collected stories reproduces problematic relations of power, there was a genuine desire on the part of the MNHI curators and scientific council, I believe, to tell the story of immigration through a diversity of individual voices. I also acknowledge that certain curatorial choices, such as



may not be aware of the ways in which their gift could intervene in the dominant narrative. I am not seeking in this section to identify subversive intent as much as subversive *effect*. Moreover, I am seeking to establish that the narrative effects (be they subversive or not) of the interplay between the human actors and the material actors are produced precisely on the margins (perhaps even outside) of human agency, will, or intent. In other words, in this section I want to turn attention to how the material objects *act out and act on* the journey of migration and the retelling of this journey in the Gifts Gallery.

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“Look, here is my mother,” says Sarah Doraghi’s label, “50% cotton, 50% polyester” next to a vitrine holding a neatly folded pillow case and a bottle of Quartz perfume ([Voici donc ma mère 50% coton 50% polyester]). Doraghi immigrated from Tehran to Paris in 1983 as a child. She and her siblings were left in the care of their grandmother and aunt while her mother stayed in Tehran until 1989.

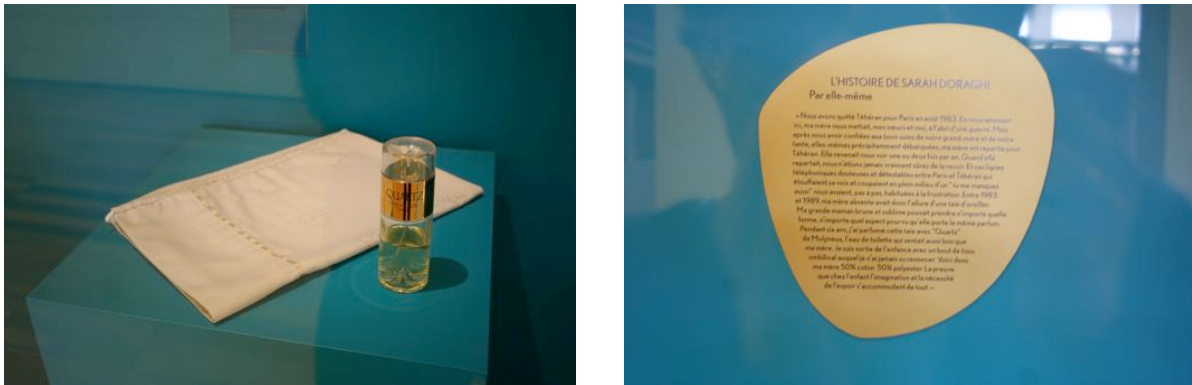


Figure 8 Perfume and pillowcase, Left, Doraghi's narrative label, Right. Photos courtesy of author.

Doraghi describes how, between her mother’s intermittent visits, “my absent mother appeared as a pillow case. My mother, a tall, magnificent brunette, could take on any shape or

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creating a way for immigrants to participate in the museum, and the rich text labels that transmit the donors words with minimal mediation, actively provide ways to complicate and nuance the national immigration story that would otherwise appear to be set in stone.

form as long as it wore the same perfume” ([ma mère absente avait donc l’allure d’une taie d’un oreiller. Ma grande maman brune et sublime pouvait prendre n’importe quelle forme, n’importe quel aspect pourvu qu’elle porte le même parfum]). As a child, Doraghi would regularly spritz this cream-colored pillow case with the perfume her mother wore, taking comfort in the olfactory presence of her mother, despite her physical absence. In the label, Doraghi calls this pillow “a bit of umbilical fabric that I was never able to let go of” ([un bout de tissu ombilical auquel j’ai jamais su renoncer]).

This object and the story the donor tells denature the plotline of the migrant narrative proposed by the MNHI temporally, affectively, and spatially. For one, though this object appears in the Accept section—the section meant to display objects that embody the moment of integrating oneself into the collective future of France—the pillow case and its lingering scent enable and embody the opposite. They are, above all, about *not letting go*. Though her mother eventually comes to stay permanently in Paris, the years of absence are not recuperated. Temporally, the pillowcase remains oriented toward the past, and, more specifically, to an individual (not collective) future that *did not happen*. Doraghi once imagined a childhood by her tall, brown-haired mother’s side, but instead her childhood is spent in search of her mother’s olfactory presence. Doraghi experienced her present as out-of-step with how she and her mother expected her childhood to take shape. Thus, affectively, the pillowcase holds on to that which was lost, not gained, during the journey of migration. This “former future”<sup>49</sup>—an outcome that was once imagined as possible, but that is no longer fathomable in the present—and its effects on

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<sup>49</sup> Koselleck’s *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, explores how “how expectations, hopes, or prognoses projected into the future are articulated into language” (1985; xxiii). He argues that historical experience of time is articulated either implicitly or explicitly in their relationship of a given past to a given future. Our understanding and experience of the present moment is shaped by “the perspective we possess from the onetime future of past generations, or more pithily, from a former future” (1985; 5).

the experience of the present, is a temporal plane that is not addressed in the MNHI's migration narrative that moves smoothly from past, to present, to future.

Furthermore, Doraghi refers to the pillow itself as first as her mother, and then as a remaining bit of the umbilical cord that tied her to her mother. The use of metaphor here is key. Doraghi is not saying that the perfumed pillow reminds her of her mother, nor even that it was like her mother. Instead, she insists on saying that it *was*, and *is* even today, her mother ("Here is my mother, 50% cotton..."). Or, more precisely, the umbilical cord: a piece of her mother's material body that it also her own material body. Spatially, then, the pillowcase brings the country left behind into the hearth of the new home. Doraghi arrived in Paris in 1983, her mother did not arrive permanently until 1989, but during those six intermediary years, the perfumed pillow took her place. Her mother thus arrives multiple times, every time she visits *but also* every time Doraghi breathes in the scent of the perfumed pillow.

As I discussed previously, the curation of the Gifts Gallery suggest that the plot of migrant narrative begins upon arrival, and that this arrival effaces all differences. The diverse trajectories coalesce into a discrete, sequenced plot that leads everyone to the same endpoint: integration into the pre-existing French identity. Doraghi's pillow, amplified by the perfume, denatures this plot by multiplying this moment of arrival. In a way, Doraghi's mother had already arrived by the time she makes the permanent move in 1989. In addition, the perfumed pillowcase modified Doraghi's lived experience in the host country to make it more hospitable to her. In this sense, the objects are not so much testifying, telling a story of migration, as *acting in and on a narrative* to change its plot. They participated in the lived experience of migration, and they also contribute to how the experience is remembers and cast into a narrative. Because of these, I consider these material objects not only as co-narrators but as *narrative agents*: they

condition the temporal planes of the plot and its spatial orientations—I will expand on this designation at the end of this chapter.

In addition, the pillowcase and perfume turn attention to migration as a sensory experience. The sensory experience highlights the intimate, intensely personal, and embodied moments of migration that cannot be swallowed up in a collective story of nation or of immigration. Though Doraghi shares a personal memory with the museum and its public, the sensory experience of her migration journey that she shares remains stubbornly intimate, inaccessible despite being put on display. Anyone else might be able to stop in a high-end boutique and ask for a sniff of Molyneux’s Quartz perfume, but that scent will only conjure up Doraghi’s mother *for her*. It is thus the singular, the private, and the intimate consequences of migration that the pillow and its perfume embody, rather than a contribution to a national story.

Finally, the perfumed pillow not only multiplies the moments of arrival and makes each of them equally “real” moments of arrival, it also inhabits, through the sensory experience, this space of arrival rather than moving on to the next marker in the plot. When Doraghi speaks of the pillowcase as a piece of umbilical fabric, she clings to what ties her flesh to her mother’s flesh. Though one could say that this is a gendering of origin as female, and read Doraghi’s language as a gesture of choosing the “motherland” over the “host country”—refusing to cut the umbilical cord, so to speak—I would argue the gesture suggests a more nuanced relationship. Doraghi speaks only of holding on to a fragment, a bit and end (“un bout”) of umbilical fabric, suggesting that the cord *has* been cut, from both bodies. Migration as an embodied and inter-bodied experience will be explored in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, in which I will

analyze the role of bodily fragments and textured bodies as metaphors in migration narratives.<sup>50</sup>

For now, I only proposed that Doraghi's deployment of the perfumed pillow case as umbilical fabric is *not* a matter of choosing one body or land over the other. Rather, it signals a persistent attention to that *which cannot even be differentiated* as belonging to one body or another, as being origin or destination. This rearranges the spatial plot of the MNHI's migration narrative, as the immigrant does not depart from an origin point and arrive at a destination point (physically or affectively) but rather the journey enfleshes both of these places into the bodily space of the migrating person.

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Another kind of denaturing of the plot line of the migrant narrative proposed by the MNHI can be heard through Louis Bissack's gift. Bissack's gift is an entire horizontal cut of a tree trunk brought from Cameroon. Before being gifted to the museum, this slab of wood had lived in Bissack's apartment, serving as a tabletop. Through the narrative label we learned that Bissack was born in Cameroon in 1955, in his early adolescence Bissack washed cars to help support his younger sibling and mothers. During this time, he met a French priest who had been sent to work in Cameroon. Soon after the priest was called back to France, he got in touch with Bissack's family. He needed to hire someone for a job in France and had thought of Bissack. Bissack had long dreamed of trying to work in France, but had always imagined he would get there by attempting a clandestine boat crossing and look for odd jobs that could pay him under

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<sup>50</sup> I will be drawing from Ahmed who investigates the sensory experience of migration as something that happens not just to a person but between bodies: "Such an understanding of embodiment can be theorized in terms of inter-embodiment, whereby the lived experience of embodiment is always already the social experience of dwelling with other bodies. Or, as Gail Weiss puts it, 'To be embodied is to be capable of being affected by other bodies'" (1992:162)" (47)

the table. Instead, he finds himself traveling by plane, landing at the Paris-Orly airport in 1972 “with a work contract in his suitcase” [avec un contrat de travail dans ses valises].



Figure 9 Table-top donated by Bissack. Photo courtesy of author.

In many ways, Bissack’s story seems to fulfill the migrant narrative the MNHI imagines, and even to exemplify the kind of hospitality logic that underpins France’s discourse on immigration. Bissack migrates legally and into good working conditions, having been taken, as he says, “under the wing” [sous l’aile] of his generous French host. He demonstrates his gratitude by sacrificing an object brought from his home country—an object, moreover, that had a personal and utilitarian function in his home—to the museum. However, in his narrative, he also mentions that despite having now lived and worked in France for several decades, and being eligible for citizenship, he has not taken that step: “As he likes to say, he is ‘France’s guest’” [Comme il se plait à le dire, il est ‘l’hôte de la France’].

I was struck by this phrase, not only because Bissack, an immigrant, consciously places himself in the role of “guest of the nation,” but because of the *pleasure* with which he appears to name himself as guest. Though he has followed all of the proper steps in the plotline that the MNHI suggests will lead to a seamless integration, Bissack prefers and pleasures in maintaining an in-but-not-of status. And yet, though he retains and relishes in his guest status, he also expands the prerogatives of the guest role. The gift he gives to the museum is the wood that was once a table in his home.<sup>51</sup> With this gesture, he turns the tables in the host-guest relationship. He is not only the grateful guest sitting at the host’s table, but has his own table to offer. As a guest, he thus claims the right to be hospitable. He also exercises his hospitality not only in the host nation, but by continuing to support his family in Cameroon with the wages he makes in France. His labor thus gives not only to the host nation, but the nation he left behind. Bissack’s gift therefore changes the endpoint of the plot laid out by the MNHI’s migration narrative: he does not become French, even though he assumes some of the rights of the host.

Furthermore, the material objects featured in the story he tells subtly challenge the assumption that differences are erased upon arrival. Bissack’s story retraces not only the migration journey he took, but also the one *he could have taken*. The possibility of this other route, the clandestine one, suggests that the plot could have gone quite differently after arrival. He may have been an unwelcome guest, sent back to Cameroon, or he might still be in France, but less easily able to offer hospitality. His sponsor could have abandoned or exploited him. These other plotlines begin to point out that there are gradations in the kinds of guests and the

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, though the catalogue contains a picture of the full table with its legs, in the Gifts Gallery, the table is displayed vertically so that one can only see the wood slab. In appearance, it looks simply like a beautiful slab of wood; one would not know it was a table unless one read the description. I suspect this choice was determined primarily by the size of the display cases, though it also has the effect of turning the table into an aesthetic object, effacing its utilitarian function. This recalls the practice of displaying in art museums only the wooden face masks of the elaborate headdresses used in dances and important ceremonies in West Africa.

kind of welcome that France offers. It also reminds us that hospitality is not necessarily generosity without self-interest; Bissack was welcomed into France for his ability to fulfill the labor needed by his host. Bissack may have found “good” host—a relationship of hospitality that was mutually beneficial—but all the other twists and turns that this plot could have taken linger in the story Bissack shares.

Ultimately, one of the major actors in the plot are the papers he carried in his suitcase: with a work contract, he had access to rights and protections that are supposed to be universal “human rights,” but that those who lack the proper immigration papers and thus live and work clandestinely are less easily able to access and demand. If Doraghi’s pillow made her lived experience of France more hospitable in the affective realm, Bissack’s papers makes his lived experience more hospitable economically as well.

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The possibility of other routes not only to arrive in France, but once in France, begins to undo the MNHI’s assumption that France is the logical endpoint to the migration narrative. In this third example, Maria Alejandra Lilliès Lacroix Valbuena Lagarde’s story continues to undo the inevitability of the ending the MNHI imagines. Lilliès Lacroix gave the museum religious mementos from Venezuela, where she was born and raised. She gave these gifts to the museum despite the fact that, in her own words, “Whenever someone uses the term immigrant, I don’t have the impression that they are talking about me” [Lorsqu’on emploie le terme d’immigré, j’ai l’impression qu’il n’est pas question de moi]. She came to France as a university student, curious to know the country where her grandfather was born. She fell in love, and stayed, getting married quickly to have the proper papers. Though she initially thought the MNHI “had nothing to do with her” [je ne me sentais pas concernée par le Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration],



she eventually decides to participate in the Gifts Gallery because “Ultimately/In the end, to immigrate is to end up staying” [Finalement, immigrer, c’est finir par rester].

Lilliès Lacroix’s story highlights the haphazard endings of immigration narratives; until one stays, one has not immigrated. And in that sense, when does one know when one has stayed? The ending is not a logical outcome as much as it is an arbitrary stopping point that recasts all the twists and turns that preceded it as leading up to that particular end. Thus, Lilliès Lacroix’s story turns attention to the category of immigrant not only as a legal status, but a structure of feeling,<sup>52</sup> and one that emerges in between the lines of legal discourse, the host country’s perceptions, community of origin perceptions, and self-narration. She notes that she did not feel like an immigrant; in some ways, she belonged to the country even before she moved there to study, since her grandfather was French. But, clearly, *someone* thought she was an immigrant, otherwise her gift would not have ended up in the museum. Her gift is a ceramic medallion from Venezuela painted with the face of Jesus. We can read the gift metaphorically, the religious symbol sacrificed at the altar of the secular state. However, it is important to note that Lilliès Lacroix *already* felt French, not like an immigrant; and, her integration did not require a giving up of conspicuous religious symbols, unlike the girls who had to give up their head scarves to continue attending school (see J. Scott). Once again, the object suggests, contra the official narrative of the Gifts Gallery, that cultural, religious, sexual differences are *not* effaced upon arrival, but that the process of “becoming French”—integrating into the republic and practicing laïcité—differentiates between these differences, excluding some.

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<sup>52</sup> I am referring to Raymond Williams’s later use of this term, which is defined in Oxford Reference as “the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts. Williams uses the term feeling rather than thought to signal that what is at stake may not yet be articulated in a fully worked-out form, but has rather to be inferred by reading between the lines.”

Interestingly, this feeling or lack of feeling like an immigrant is noted—and dismissed—in du Mazaubrun’s summary of findings from the Gifts Gallery collection. Du Mazaubrun observes that relatively few of the material objects in the gallery donated by “first-generation” immigrants. She says, “In fact, many immigrants say they ‘don’t feel like immigrants,’ because they consider their exile a temporary one, with the hope of returning some day, despite having spent a number of years in France and having begun the naturalization process” (Mazaubrun 12; [D’ailleurs beaucoup [d’immigrés] se disent « ne pas se sentir immigrés », puisqu’ils perçoivent souvent leur exil comme temporaire, dans l’espoir d’un retour, en dépit du nombre d’années passées en France et de démarches de naturalisation entamées]). Though these individuals emphasize that they do not *feel* like immigrants, for du Mazaubrun, this feeling is an invalid indicator of their immigrant status: they arrived from another country and show no signs of leaving, thus they are immigrants.

The affective dimension of the migration journey—the *feeling* like an immigrant—brings up the question of who needs to remember their migration narrative, and who is not allowed to forget? In what ways does a hospitality logic in migration narratives create a burden of memory that perpetuates the unequal statuses of host and guest? The discussion of the feeling of immigration comes up again when du Mazaubrun compares by origin the communities participated in the gallery. She notes that the majority of the donors came from other European countries, while other communities equally if not more significant in number, like the Asian immigrant community, barely participated. She also observes that the Italian community in particular was very active, postulating that “This community is perfectly integrated in French society today, which could explain the motivation of the descendants of Italians to bring attention to their ancestors’ journeys” (du Mazaubrun 12; [Cette communauté est aujourd’hui

parfaitement intégrée dans la société française, ce qui pourrait expliquer la volonté des descendants d'italiens de valoriser le parcours de leurs ancêtres]). Du Mazaubrun's observations suggest that the affective experience of immigration varies between communities, and does not necessarily correspond with the *legal* status of residency nor with the time of arrival. What remains unsaid in Du Mazaubrun's comments is that a shared skin color, religion, and cultural norms could have played a role the "perfect integration" of the Italian community. The purportedly color-blind and secular Republic appears to nevertheless accommodate more easily the communities that resemble the imagined *français de souche* in phenotype, religious background, and culture.

At another point, Du Mazaubrun notes that most of the donors and participants in the gallery were the children or grand-children of immigrants, commonly referred to as second and third generation immigrants. These individuals "feel, on the contrary, very interested with the museum's process, to the extent that certain ones express the 'feeling of being immigrants themselves' even though they were born on French soil" (du Mazaubrun 12; [se sentent au contraire très intéressés par la démarche vis-à-vis du musée, au point que certains formulent le « sentiment d'être eux-mêmes des immigrés » bien que nés sur le sol français]). Though she does not identify from which community or country these immigrants come from, the language she reports them using to describe their status in France does not correspond with what she noted in the Italian community. These participants do not identify themselves not as descendants of immigrants wanting remember their ancestors, but *as immigrants themselves*.

What might this décalage between how they feel and their immigration status tell us? On the one hand, it points to how upon arrival, differences are not erased but rather *redifferentiated*. If (some of) the descendants of (some) immigrants feel like immigrants rather than like citizens,

this suggests that in their lived experience creates a distance between themselves and the national identity.<sup>53</sup> Ahmed points out that “Feminist, queer, and critical race philosophers have shown us how social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others,” explaining also that, “Difference is not simply found in the body, but is established as a relations between bodies” (2005, 5; 2000, 44). Difference is articulated as bodies inhabit the same space and are determined as familiar or strange, proximate or distant, and all the gradations in between. Because of this, Ahmed argues that “the lived experience of embodiment is always already *the social experience of dwelling with other bodies*” (47). It is not the process of arrival that creates an immigrant feeling, but what comes after. In the context of immigration to France, while the differences in question fall all over a spectrum, the ones that France insists are not part of its national identity—race, religion, and gender—*do* appear to function as markers of integration.<sup>54</sup> These differences are turned into irreconcilable differences with the “universal” values of France and become vectors of exclusion from French ways of being.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In the following chapters of the dissertation I will discuss how material objects participate in the affective experience of migration. How belonging, in other words, whether that

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<sup>53</sup> Rosello points out that the popular and scholarly practice of tracking “generations” of immigrants can enable this kind of differentiated inclusion: “the ‘difference’ from an imagined native identity might become so imperceptible that they will not even be identified as part of a “second generation” that they are supposed to embody. Yet, even if it is fuzzy, invisible, and inconsistent, the idea of a “second generation” does not lose its relevance and power; it allows us to continue to think of “immigrants” as guests and of “us” as hosts. If we think of immigrants’ children as “mediators” between “us” and “them” (rather than, for example, as part of “us”), the parents will continue to be seen as newcomers (even if they have been in the country for thirty years)” (2001; 91)

<sup>54</sup> “Indeed we need to factor in what Edward Soja calls “the geopolitics of the body,” meaning that race, gender, and ethnicity often firmly attach some bodies to certain narratives” (Coly 16)

<sup>55</sup> As Joan Wallach Scott argues, “Abstraction allows individuals to be conceived of as the same (as universal), but sameness is measure in terms of concrete ways of being (as Frenchness). And, ascriptions of difference, conceived as irreducible difference, whether based on culture or sex or sexuality, are taken to preclude any aspiration to sameness. If one has already been labeled different on any of these grounds, it becomes difficult to find a way of arguing that one is or can become the same” (13).

is a belonging oriented towards the idea of a nation, a culture, a race, or to a particular shared history, is produced with and by not only the stories we tell ourselves, but the material bodies that act in and on these stories. When I speak of the agency of material bodies in migration narratives, I want to distinguish between two faces of this agency . One is a *narrative* agency, and the other an *inter-bodily/assemblagic* agency.

Though these two kinds of agency will be explored in the subsequent chapters, I will say a few words to begin to sketch out the contours of my reading of material agency. To provide a contrast to an agency-oriented understanding of nonhuman material bodies, I would describe the curatorial deployment of the material objects donated to the Gifts Gallery as being the opposite of an agency-oriented understanding. The MNHI treats these objects as inert, testimonial objects. The objects are valued for their role as witnesses: they provide evidence that a migration journey took place, and any effects they produce come from this evidentiary power. Certainly, the objects do testify in that they provide material traces of France's long history with immigration. However, I propose calling these objects not witnesses of the migration experience, but *narrative agents*. I do this to emphasize less that they narrate the story themselves, but that they *enable the conditions for* storytelling. We can see this clearly in the Gifts Gallery, where the act of giving the objects created the occasion to tell, record, and exhibit the stories of the immigrant donors.

That being said, I would also emphasize that narrative agency is not the only kind of agency that the objects demonstrate. In their previous owners' lives, the objects enabled particular actions, occasions, and structures of feeling. We can catch glimpses of this inter-bodied agency in the three examples I pulled from the Gifts Gallery. In the first example, Doraghi's perfumed pillowcase participated in the affective experience of her arrival to France. The ability of fabric to hold on to a scent, its pliability and portability, all permitted Doraghi to

smell even if she couldn't see her mother during the years apart. Jane Bennett, in her theory of vibrant materiality, might read this assemblage of perfume, pillowcase, and child as "an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power" (23). In Chapters Two and Four, I will discuss Bennett's theory more extensively. For this chapter, I use this understanding of agency as located between human and nonhuman to highlight how a material object (the perfumed pillowcase) thus shaped the migratory experience of Doraghi *as she lived it*, not just the narration of the experience after the fact; this is an inter-bodily agency, the two material bodies affecting each other and shaping the conditions of possibility for affect and action.

In the second example from the Gifts Gallery, Bissack's story, two major objects, as discussed play a role. The table top, as a narrative agent, opens up a space for him to tell the story of his migration experience, and its form and semantic function enable his narration to turn the tables on the expected host-guest roles. Meanwhile, the papers he had carried in his suitcase display an inter-bodily agency in that they enable a materially advantageous experience for Bissack in the host country. Bissack alone would have been equally able to perform the labor his host wanted him to perform, but without the papers, his experience would have likely been financially, physically, and affectively precarious. The abstract process of immigration, in all its economic, affective, and bodily precarity is materialized through these papers.

I employ the terms of material narrative agency and inter-bodily agency because they allow for critical readings that are more attentive to the distinct ways that nonhuman material bodies act on human experiences, particularly migratory experiences. Migration experiences are intensely physical and sensorial ones. They involve the movement of one's body from one location's particular sounds, smells, sights, and textures to another location's set of sensory

experiences. Migrations are also experiences that splinter the dominant locations—homes—that shelter identity (family, culture, birthplace, living place). These affective “homes” are split from the sensory experiences that accompanied them: “The journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience” (Ahmed 2000; 90). Those of us that seek to grasp the myriad of re-orientations to time, place, and self that migration experiences unleash need to be equipped with the language and tools that allow for critical readings of these experiences in all their sensorial and affective nuance. I argue that the framework of a narrative and interbodily agency that operates between the human and nonhuman can contribute to such readings.

Of course, the categories of narrative agency and inter-bodily agency are not meant to operate exclusively of each other. In the final example I discussed from Gifts Gallery, Lillies Lacroix’s mementos from Venezuela provide an occasion not only to tell the story of her journey, but to recalibrate the affective relationship to her host country and to the status of immigrant. Before designating her mementos as gifts to the MNHI, Lillies Lacroix didn’t feel that she belonged to the immigrant community. Using them to map out her journey not only provided the occasion to tell her journey, but shifted her attachment. She begins to feel that there may yet be a common ground between herself and others who have lived migrant experiences. This re-tilling of a common ground through a retelling of migration experiences can, I argue, transform the terrain of belonging.

As Ahmed’s phrases it, “Migrant bodies, selves, and communities cannot simply be understood as simply one side of identity or the other, or on one side of the community or the other: rather, it is the uncommon estrangement of migration itself that allows migrants to remake what it is *they might have yet in common*” (94). Rather than understanding the migration

narrative as a journey from a home identity to a host identity (or a refusal of host identity by clinging on to home identity), we can map out plotlines that create the conditions of empathy and imagination that irrigate an underexplored common ground. The remaining three chapters will analyze migration narratives that attempt to ground a feeling of belonging in different types of “homes,” and use the framework of material agency to understand what goes into the kinds of groundings, and their sensorial and affective effects.



## Chapter Two: RETURN

*“There is no subject, there is no object.... But there are events”  
Bruno Latour, Pandora’s Box, 281*

### *The Event*

Winter 2015, shuffling between Paris and a Midwest college town, was an uncanny time to be writing about mourning. The writing of this chapter began in France, shortly before two young men, claiming to act in the name of Islam, walked into the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and gunned down the entire editorial team, the police officer that was there to prevent such a thing from happening, and a few other people who worked for the newspaper or in the building. *Charlie Hebdo*, though not as widely read as it once had been, was still a touchstone of French culture. The newspaper—mainly caricatures and satirical articles—was known for its irreverent writing and penchant for taking on the most powerful figures and institutions in the French state, even the figures that were normally sacred.

Throughout its existence, the newspaper routinely suffered from boycotts, hate mail, and—less often, but occasionally—state sanctions for going “too far” in its representations of established political powers, particularly the Catholic Church as well as the far right wing’s party, the *Front National*. Nevertheless, the newspaper’s portraits of the prophet Mohammed sparked the most-high-profile controversies, and *Charlie Hebdo*’s stance against what they called

Islamic extremism blended easily into a rising anti-Islamic sentiment in France.<sup>56</sup> These satirical drawings earned the newspaper death threats, a lawsuit (which they won) in 2007, and a firebombing of their offices in 2011. The debate on the secular left rested on whether *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons *racialized* Islam through its portrayals of Islamic extremists—and were thus inappropriate—or if, as the editors claimed, the caricatures “merely” attacked religious fundamentalism of any color.

By late 2014, however, the French authorities had decided that the threats of violence against *Charlie Hebdo* had attenuated. They reduced the security detail that trailed editor-in-chief and founder Stéphane Charbonnier and other members of the team. On January 7, 2015, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi showed up with their rifles at the newspaper's office during the weekly editorial meeting and ended the lives of twelve people.

### ***Unmournable Citizens***

Because I was in France researching the material that is now on these pages, I was present not only for the event but for the aftershocks. I was present as solidarity marches were organized and a national minute of silence observed; even the metros held their wheels for that minute on January 8, 2015. A few days later, I watched as 1.6 million people marched in solidarity to the Place de la République in Paris; President François Hollande and the leaders of many nations participated, and simultaneous demonstrations were organized around the world.

In his address to the nation the evening of the assassinations, President François Hollande sought to give meaning to what had just happened, declaring, “Ces hommes, cette femme, sont morts pour l'idée qu'ils se faisaient de la France, c'est-à-dire la liberté. [...] Aujourd'hui, c'est la

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<sup>56</sup> *Charlie Hebdo* began to focus its satirical energies on Islamic fundamentalists in the early 2000s. When accused of xenophobia, its contributors and editors insisted that they were equal-opportunity jesters: “L'attaque contre toutes les religions, c'est ce qui constitue notre identité” [Attacking all religions is the definition of our identity] affirmed editor-in-chief Gérard Biard (Ternisien 2012).

République toute entière qui a été agressée. La République, c'est la liberté d'expression" (Elysée, January 7, 2015; [These men, this woman, died for what they believed France stands for: freedom. [...] Today, what was attacked is the Republic itself. The Republic is freedom of expression]. If these individuals had died because they incarnated the national value of freedom of expression—the core *identity* of the nation according to Hollande—then mourning their death took on a particular valence: mourning was a civic obligation. Mourning was not to be a solitary process but a collective manifestation performed in a public space.

In addition, the purpose of mourning would not be merely to commemorate the lives of individuals but to commemorate and insist on the collective values of a nation. This sentiment threaded its way throughout the official statements of the French government, and the reports by journalists on national and international media. Prime Minister Manuel Valls encouraged people to attend the solidarity demonstrations that were scheduled for the Sunday after the attack, “J'en appelle à l'unité, tous ceux qui aiment la France doivent venir à la marche de dimanche, c'est *une manifestation citoyenne*, ça c'est la France” (TF1, January 9 2015; emphasis mine [I am calling for unity. All who hold France dear must come to the Sunday march. It is a *citizens' assembly*, and this is what makes us France]). The civic turn that mourning took called upon the citizens of the nation to collectively mourn two things at the same time: the bloody death of 12 humans, and an assault on the freedom of speech. By mourning both, we would claim our belonging to a kind of enlightened citizenship through a valiant insistence on the freedom of expression as a universal human right.

The problem with presenting the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks as a violation of universal human rights worth collective mourning, is that human rights are not universal. The lived experience of exercising these rights is not universally homogenous but inflected with experiences of gender,

race, and language among other factors.<sup>57</sup> In addition, as many were quick to point out, the fairly frequent deaths of journalists from non-Western nations killed in their own countries for “speaking freely” receive little global media attention and no international political commemoration. However, what I want to highlight is that the very language of universal human rights enacts particular modes of belonging that render some people as mournable—salient members of a community—and others not. To mourn the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* specifically as an attack on the freedom of expression is to stake a claim in a world where freedom of expression looks a particular way. That world is one in which *Charlie Hebdo* can become a secular martyr in a struggle to uphold the freedoms a nation holds dear, while other struggles to exercise freedom, such as wearing a headscarf, are perceived as threats to that same nation.<sup>58</sup>

Teju Cole brings the first glimmers of this idea to germination in his wonderfully insightful response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. In an essay titled “Unmournable Bodies,” Cole argues that along with sitting in just sorrow over the violent deaths of twelve humans, we—a “we” Cole positions as citizens of the Western world—also ought to examine the way our nations use force and violence to police “our” beliefs about what democracy, personal liberty, and freedom of speech look like. Cole writes, and I quote at length because his words are worth their weight, that although he was encouraged by the generous acts of worldwide solidarity in the aftermath, the reaction to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks nevertheless:

indicates how easy it is in Western societies to focus on radical Islamism as the real, or the only, enemy. This focus is part of the consensus about mournable bodies, and it often keeps us from paying proper attention to other, ongoing

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<sup>57</sup> See Chapter One, particularly the discussion on secularism and republicanism for more on this.

<sup>58</sup> It should go without saying, but it does not, that no vision of any world should be policed and enforced with violence; I am not saying it was right for two men to take guns into their hands and empty their cartridges into the living, soft membrane of the bodies of the people who ran *Charlie Hebdo*, or any other newspaper, or any other thing. What I *am* saying is that a version of this same violence is already being used to police a culturally specific (not universal) understanding of liberty.

instances of horrific carnage around the world [...] violence from “our” side continues unabated. By this time next month, in all likelihood, many more “young men of military age” and many others, neither young nor male, will have been killed by U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan and elsewhere. Their deaths will be considered as natural and incontestable as deaths like Menocchio’s, under the Inquisition. Those of us who are writers will not consider our pencils broken by such killings. But that incontestability, that unmournability, just as much as that massacre in Paris, is the clear and present danger to our collective *liberté*.

Cole is not sanctioning the actions of Chérif and Saïd Kouachi. Rather, he is asking if perhaps there is a continuum that links the innocent blood the Kouachi brothers spilled with the innocent blood spilled as collateral in American bombings in Pakistan, for example. If so, why is one kind of blood mourned as an affront on all human values, and the other kind of blood spillage deemed as *necessary* damage? What does consensus around which bodies are mournable, and which ones are unmournable, tell us about the way we outline “correct” practices of being and belonging to a national and international modern citizenry?

The questions seemed particularly poignant and pointed, given two other “events” that were—more slowly, less surely, but still stubbornly—entering the newscape of North American and Western Europe: the migrant crises in the Mediterranean, and the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S.A. following the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore. Both of these crises highlighted the systematic loss of human lives through state-sanctioned practices of enforcement, and yet these deaths were not decried as assaults on universal principles of humanity. To the contrary, it seemed that these deaths were seen as unfortunate but necessary to the proper functioning of state order. Collateral damage of controlling the streets, controlling the border.

Cole’s phrasing of “unmournable” bodies clung to me as I dug into the two narrative spaces that I was preparing to center this chapter around. The first is French-Senegalese author Fatou Diome’s novel *Kétala* (2006), in which the belongings of a young Senegalese woman take it upon themselves to tell the tale of her migration to France, estrangement from her family, and

tragically early death. The second text is Nigerian author Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* (2009), in which a teenage girl from Lagos is sexually abused by her uncle when she arrives in London, becomes romantically and sexually involved with her social caseworker, and commits suicide without anyone to notice her disappearance. Both are texts that practice the mourning of bodies whose deaths were treated as normal, necessary, and thus, *unmournable*.

What this chapter takes as a given is that mourning is an inherently narrative practice, a telling and retelling of lives loved and lost. The texts that I've chosen operate through *mise-en-abimes*: they tell the story of the telling of a mourning story. To put it another way, they themselves practice the very processes of mourning that they represent. The mourning practices enacted by the texts, I will argue, are *oppositional* readings of the tragedies they tell. In this chapter, I draw on Ross Chambers—who is himself building on Michel de Certeau's deployment of oppositional strategies—by delving into the *room for maneuver* that is made possible through the relationships between human and nonhuman material bodies in mourning narratives. In other words, I explore how an oppositional reading of the tragedies is made possible because the texts make space for the power of materiality to act in places where narrative power stutters. This chapter furthermore asks what these relationships do to our own (critical) reading practices: what does the material *agencement*<sup>59</sup> of narrative elements open up in the space between reader and text? In inviting and formulating readerly positions, what kinds of subjectivities—relationships between self, state, and other—are likewise formulated?

Throughout the chapter, I will trace the interactions between humans and material objects—particularly personal belongings—that appear in *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail*. I will

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<sup>59</sup> Here, I am thinking of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *agencement* in *Towards a Minor Literature*. The specific material environment with its contingencies that make not only the enunciation and the delivery of a message possible, but constitute the very desire to speak it or hear it. This is particularly necessary, Ross Chambers (2004) argues, in discourses of extremity, where the undesirability of the message being delivered must be overcome.

propose a few ways in which these interactions invite oppositional readings and a disidentifactory structure of feeling (a structure that I will define along the way). Material mourning in the two novels, I will argue, tends to *reterritorialize* bodies as mournable through three narrative moves. First, unlike the civic mourning I described earlier, which reinforced existing hierarchies of being and belonging along previously established frontiers of collective national identity, material mourning opens avenues of attachment that are not circumscribed by the familiar territories of familial, linguistic, social, racial, sexual, or geographic identification. It furthermore proposes a model of belonging that flattens those hierarchies of belonging and the freedoms they entail. Secondly, material mourning diffuses a usually anthropocentric sense of agency into an energy that is distributed across a field of animate and inanimate objects. Like the material belongings in *Kétala* which, as I briefly mentioned, take it upon themselves to tell the story of their owner's life, I see material mourning as a rhetorical move that broadens the sources and senses of empathy available to minoritarian subjects. Finally, material mourning insists on the frailty of the human body, and emphasizes the way this vulnerability is both invited and shared. This is a means of universalizing human suffering in a way that does not efface differences and injustices yet does open territory that can be claimed as common ground. The three things together enable the reterritorialization of bodies that deviated from the normative practices of being and belonging as mournable ones, but they also begin to model and to provide those structures of feeling necessary to imagine a new mode of belonging, one that can shift the questions we pose to our postcolonial present and reshape the thinkable future.

### ***Disidentifactory Mourning***

Mourning, as I described in the opening anecdote, may be mobilized by the state to bring a collective of people together to reaffirm the values and practices around which it articulates a national identity. However, mourning can also be a subversive practice, reterritorializing as

mournable the bodies that deviate from the norms of being without—and this is important—erasing, eliding, effacing the ways they butted against the attachments that are practiced by the majority of subjects in a modern nation state. This is the kind of mourning that José Esteban Muñoz theorizes in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Muñoz proposes the concept of disidentification as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that consciously elides and punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (3). In other words, this is a relationship wherein a subject that exists at the edges of a public sphere neither fully assimilates nor fully rejects a potentially repressive ideological apparatus but rather finds ways to use it towards her own ends.<sup>60</sup>

For Muñoz, the act of mourning can be co-opted as a survival strategy that enables a disidentificatory structure. Exploring the disidentificatory potential of mourning, I will argue, becomes a useful lens for analyzing the relationships between the protagonists and their material belongings in *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail*. But it will also help parse out the readerly positions that the texts invite. Like oppositionality, which I will discuss further on, key to this strategy is a reliance on ambivalent energies to enact affective change. In my analysis of *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail*, material mourning is one of the avenues through which disidentificatory strategies can be deployed; it puts in place between reader and text “an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by

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<sup>60</sup> Muñoz carefully traces the genealogy of disidentification, which he locates in Louis Althusser’s theory of subjection formation through ideological interpellation, in which a subject is “called” into formation by the ideological apparatus of a dominant structure such as the nation-state, religion, etc. Interpellation is at some level a process of recognition, as the subject must identify himself at that which is being hailed. Muñoz positions his deployment of disidentification in relation to Judith Butler’s earlier work, who sees the ambivalent recognition—“to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject”—as a point of departure for potentially reworking cultural constructs and their accompanying empathies (Muñoz 12).



contradictions and ambivalences” (Muñoz 71). Muñoz’s work provides a language for the kind of mourning that pauses on overlooked lives without forgetting the conditions that rendered them unmournable to the majority in the first place. This is a kind of mourning that give us tools, in other words, to retain the disruptive qualities of those lives that existed at the margins of normativity, while creating a network of sympathies through which a reader can see the fate of those previously unmournable bodies as tied into the fate of a larger collectivity. It opens, one might say, wider avenues to collective living precisely because it offers modes of attachments that work around current borders of belonging drawn by *both* a nationalistic identification and a diasporic formation.

### ***Materials for Mournability***

One text in which we can trace mourning’s subversive edges is *Kétala*, published by Fatou Diome in 2006. “Lorsqu’une personne meurt, nul ne se soucie de la tristesse de ses meubles !” [When a person dies,” the opening line of *Kétala*’s prologue laments, “no one feels for the furniture’s loss!] (7). Strange it may seem, to react to a death by worrying about the emotional well-being of the deceased person’s material possessions! Nevertheless, *Kétala*, a novel about the interiors of mourning, continually enacts this move of directing attention to the intimacy of a relationship between human being and nonhuman material entity. The novel begins in Senegal at the death of a young woman, Mémoria, and takes place in the week that leads up to her funeral. In that week, the story of Mémoria’s life from birth to death, from girlhood to arranged marriage to separation, from natal village to Dakar, to France, and back, is retold to the reader. The telling, however, is voiced not by her beloved ones nor by the abstract third person narrator, but by her belongings. It is Mémoria’s material inheritance—her couch, her silverware, a pearl necklace, the clock that hangs on the wall, to name just a few—that gather to piece together her life’s trajectory. While a third person narrative voice floats over the entire scene,

opening and closing sections of the novel, describing the present activities of the objects which are locked inside Mémoria's apartment, it is the objects that narrate everything that happened to Mémoria leading up to the narrative present.

Even though the objects names are not personalized, each object does have a distinct personality—Mouchoir (Tissue) is fragile and emotional while Montre (Watch) is an even-tempered know-it-all; Masque (Mask) and Chasseur (Hunter) vie for the attentions of another wooden carving, Coumba Djiguène; Collier (Necklace) puts on the airs of a fine lady. The belongings all bicker and interrupt each other over petty matters. Similarly, the description of their physical features is markedly anthropomorphic; eager to listen to what Porte (Door) has overheard, “Les chaises se penchèrent sur la pointe de leurs pieds, les fauteuils se penchèrent, le grille-pain ouvrit sa bouche édentée, la table se rapprocha à quatre pattes, l’ordinateur ne fut plus qu’un œil figé, à l’écoute” [The chairs leaned forward to the tips of their toes, the armchairs leaned forward, the toaster oven opened its toothless mouth, the table crawled closer, the computer became a motionless eye: they were all ears] (14). These are mobile objects, leggy and eager, with expressive facial features and human senses. The rhetorical move of placing the narrative voice in the material belongings has more at stake, however, than mere anthropomorphic amusement. The material mourning in *Kétala* comes out of an initial absence of mourning: the objects speak—and speak to each other—because no one else is doing the work of telling and listening to Mémoria's life story.

The belongings' intimate relationship with Mémoria puts in sharp relief Mémoria's alienation from her own biological family. Her parents, siblings, and extended family never enter the apartment in which the objects are narrating Mémoria's life. In fact, the only part of the mourning process they care about is the *kétala*: the distribution of Mémoria's material goods at

the end of the eight-day mourning period. As the objects will eventually piece together, Mémoria's familial estrangement was caused by her failure to live up to the standards of "womanhood." Coming from a respectable family in Dakar, Mémoria's parents had arranged for her marriage to a family friend, Mahkou. Though initially concerned when, several months into the marriage, Mémoria still wasn't pregnant, her extended family rejoiced when the young couple moved to France and began sending financial support back home. This illusion of a happy, dutiful couple is shattered when Mémoria returns to Dakar a few years later, still childless, now husbandless, and dying of AIDS after having supported herself (and her family in Senegal) through prostitution. Her deviant sexual behavior and broken marriage status render her body an unmournable one; her death is "normal" because she did not abide by "proper" sexual standards and her death is "necessary" because as an HIV carrier, she posed a threat to the health of a collectivity. Both in her hometown and abroad, it seems, her death was more worthy of being forgotten than of being remembered.

However, Coumba Djiguène—the statue that belonged to Mémoria—reveals to the rest of the objects something that not even Mémoria's family knows: the reason that Mémoria and Mahkou moved to France in the first place was that Mémoria found out that her husband was in a longstanding romantic and sexual relationship with her closest friend, Tamara. Late one night, Mémoria, frustrated that Mahkou is wholly uninterested in sexually consummating their marriage, goes unannounced to Tamara's house to confide in her—only to discover that Mahkou is already there. The nature of Mahkou and Tamara's relationship is evident. That night, Mémoria also finds out that Tamara not biologically female, but has been living as a woman ever since she arrived in Dakar. Tamara (previously named Tamsir) and Mahkou had met and become lovers in Gambia, long before Mahkou's marriage to Mémoria. When Tamsir's father discovers

this same-sex intimacy, Tamsir flees Gambia and follows Mahkou to Senegal. Tamsir becomes Tamara and the love affair continues despite Mahkou's marriage to Mémoria. Upon the discovery of the affair and of Mahkou's same-sex desire, Mémoria decides she must flee as well, and take Mahkou to France. She believes that "Là-bas, loin de tout, ils apprendraient à mener une vraie vie matrimoniale" [Over there, away from it all, they would learn to have a real married life] (128). Mahkou is reluctant, but since Mémoria threatens to reveal his secret if he refuses, they pack up their belongings and move to France.

It may seem odd that Mémoria leaves her homeland rather than leaving her husband when she discovers that Mahkou is sexually interested in men. *Kétala*, however, shows that "home" is not merely a geographic space, but a set of gender relationships and behaviors. The novel frequently mentions how Mémoria is touted by her family and peers as the ideal Senegalese woman: beautiful, brilliant, a talented dancer, obedient daughter, loyal friend, and desired by many men. And yet, without consummating her marriage and having children, her womanhood is unstable ground, as is, it seems, her claim to belong to a Senegalese nation-building project. Mémoria's wedding *pagne* tells the rest of the objects how Mémoria and Mahkou's mothers have the couple's bed sheets checked every morning to find signs of first intercourse. After a week goes by without proof of intercourse, the mothers arrange to use chicken's blood to fake the penetration of the hymen. The blood-stained sheet, a vicarious and fraudulent witness, is triumphantly displayed to the family and paraded through the streets. After months of a still-chaste marriage, Mémoria reveals her sexual frustration to her mother, who puts the burden back on Mémoria. The mother gives her a string of beads infused with sexual powers. These beads overhear Mémoria's mother telling her daughter: "le bois mouillé n'empêche jamais la bonne ménagère de tisonner son feu et servir un bon plat chaud" [damp wood won't keep a

good house wife from kindling a fire and serving up a hot meal] (80). The message her mother sends is that if Mémoria fails to seduce her husband, then she's failed her family. In short, arousing desire, consummating it, and producing a child is the measure of her womanhood. Finding herself married to a man who has no interest in having sexual relations, Mémoria no longer fits in to any of the sexual and social roles that are available to women in her country; she may be in the geographic location of "home," but she no longer belongs, and thus she must leave.

### ***Sexualities of Citizenship***

What we must pause on here is that gender relations and collective identity are forms of attachment that are closely—and problematically—related to each other in a postcolonial African context. Since the African independence movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s, collective identity has been a fraught question. No longer the subjects of an imperial power, the question to grapple with what political-cultural formation could hold together people of differing linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, whose cohabitation was, in part, the result of the violent and disruptive process of colonization and the slave trade. When the colonized territories gained independence, they organized themselves politically and culturally as nation-states. Independence from the colonial powers did not, however, guarantee freedom from all forms of oppression; in fact, they reinforced a narrow definition of sexual identity and expression. As Neville Hoad elucidates in *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (2007), "[i]n certain crucial ways, nationalism, as a hybrid product of European enlightenment and romantic discourses, carries its own set of implied gender relations, even when appropriated, or used from below by anticolonial nationalisms in the struggle for decolonization" (57). The imposition of heterosexual monogamy as the "properly modern" practice of intimacy during colonization effaced earlier practices of homosexual and heterosexual intimacy and gender relations that had previously existed in

African cultures. These practices, in fact, had been used as evidence by European colonial projects of the African populations' need for civilization.<sup>61</sup> Paradoxically, this homophobic discourse has been internalized in some African nationalistic discourses that now claim that homosexuality is a “white disease” that was introduced to the African continent and people through colonialism or slavery.<sup>62</sup> This fusion of national identity and sexual identity makes it discursively impossible to identify as “gay” and “African” or “Senegalese” at the same time.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, the nation-state is not the only framework of identity that holds sway in postcolonial Africa. Given the long history of multiple dispersions and ongoing migrations, the diasporic experience resonates as a shared experience that may organize collective ties and facilitate a sense of belonging for peoples who identify as black. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1994), which outlines one of the most enduring theorizations of black diaspora, Paul Gilroy famously rerouted black identity not through African roots (origin) but through the routes that crisscross the Atlantic. He argued that diaspora is the key cultural unit that defines a black or pan-African identity, one that could replace geographically or historically bounded units of analysis. This move of putting diaspora at the center of a black identity was supposed to exemplify a more capacious and mobile form of

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<sup>61</sup> Hoad notes that the colonial administration was deeply interested in observing and defining sexual behaviors. He states that “bodily practices signified as sexual or acts signifying bodily practices as sexual may have been instrumental in the instigation of colonial rule and were certainly and important part of its implementation” (7)

<sup>62</sup> For a full discussion, see Hoad (2007), particularly Chapters 4, and 5; see also Hayes *Queer Roots of the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (2016), particularly Chapters 1 and 2; see also Babar M'Baye's “The Origins of Senegalese Homophobia: Discourses on Homosexuals and Transgender People in Colonial and Postcolonial Senegal” which includes some discussion of homophobia and nationalism in Uganda as well. All three of these texts draw from anthropologic sources, literature, popular discourse, and historical documents to address queer sexualities and gender nonconforming practices and their representations from outside and inside the African continent. See also the African Studies Review Forum on “Homophobic Africa?” (56.2 September 2013).

<sup>63</sup> This impossibility and invisibility is compounded for queer women, as the documentaries *The Vibrancy of Silence* (Djilo Kamba and Ekotto 2017) and *Ouvrir la Voix* (Gay 2017) also profile queer and lesbian women who testify to the difficulty of identifying as black African and gay, both on the continent and abroad. The South African photographer Zanele Muholi has been creatively documenting the queer lives of women in her country, and contributing to the rethinking of gender through a local lens (see Gabeba Baderoon's “ ‘Gender Within Gender’: Zanele Muholi's Images of Trans Being and Becoming”).

belonging, one that could accommodate ties to multiple territories and move away from a conflation of race and place and nation.

However, if nationalism espouses a heteronormative and patriarchal model of belonging, diaspora as the nation's "other" often reifies as much as it contests the same masculinist, Eurocentric, and heteronormative vision of belonging. By focusing on experiences from which women have historically been excluded in order to define diaspora and by framing culture as a shared inheritance, Gilroy's theorization of the diasporic experience implicitly reproduced the latent androcentric and genealogic structure of nationality.<sup>64</sup> In fact, as Stefan Helmreich noted, "diaspora" is a word with biblical origins, whose etymology alludes to the scattering of seeds, which in the Judeo-Christian cosmology stand in for sperm. Diaspora's origins thus "refer us to a system of kinship reckoned through men" (Helmreich 245). In both its etymological root and its scholarly routes, diaspora has not been as hospitable a formation as it initially appeared.<sup>65</sup>

Before returning to the novel to see how the definition of home is tied up in questions of sexual longing and belonging, we must take into account how it is not only that nationalism and diaspora presuppose heterosexual gender relations, but that sexual practices and affective intimacies themselves are primarily understood through the lens of a Euro-American definition of sexuality. Moreover, the modern Euro-American definition of sexuality is itself fairly recent scientific construct oriented around the an understanding of monogamous *heterosexuality* as the norm, as Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*. It is necessary, as Gopinath so succinctly puts it, to interrogate "the globalization of 'gay' identity that replicates a colonial

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<sup>64</sup> See Clifford (1994), Ganguly (1992), and Mohanty (1992) for examples of early studies that noted this trend or attempted to account for the gendered experience of diaspora.

<sup>65</sup> Though it must be noted that Jarrod Hayes' *Queer Roots of the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* compellingly argues that if one goes back to Kobena Mercer's "earliest redefinitions of diaspora in black British Cultural studies, it starts to look like diaspora may very well have been queer all along" (2016, 16). See also Jafari Allen's edited special issue of *GLQ: Gay And Lesbian Studies Quarterly* titled "Black/Queer/Diaspora."

narrative of development and progress that judges all ‘other’ sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity” (11). Hoad similarly argues that the plurality of “homosexualities” and the particularities of “African” sexualities have been effaced not only through political practice and discourse in Africa, but in scholarly studies of Africa as well.<sup>66</sup> Whether the practices of intimacy—sexual and affective—that existed alongside heterosexual practices in Africa at the time of colonization were presented as deviations or as cultural norms, they were used to justify the colonial mission and brutal practices of imposing heterosexual, monogamous sexual “normalcy.”<sup>67</sup>

Because of this, a history of non-heterosexual intimacy on the African continent has been lost. As Babacar M’Baye argues in the case of Senegal specifically, “it is not *homosexuality* but rather *homophobia* that was a colonial imposition. Such colonial homophobia produced the denial of the Africanness of homosexuality that we see in contemporary Senegal, which erases and silences the important contributions that homosexual and transgender subcultures have made to the nation’s history” (123-24).<sup>68</sup> Paradoxically, today, African nations are criticized internationally for their homophobic intolerance, in the same language of progress and properly civilized behavior that once laced the colonial discourse that banished previous “non-normative”

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<sup>66</sup> Hoad points to a few studies that depart from this tendency: *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Societies* (Amadiume 1987), *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* (Arnfred 2004), and two essays in Murray and Roscoe’s *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (1998); Deborah Amory’s “Mashoga, Mabasha, and Magai: ‘Homosexuality’ On the East African Coast” and Kendall “‘When A Woman Loves A Woman’ in Lesotho: Love, Sex, and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia”). Sylvie Tamale’s *African Sexualities: A Reader* also offers a multidimensional survey of diverse practices of intimacy on the African continent.

<sup>67</sup> For more on how sexual mores and gender norms were both imposed and contested in the imperial space—and how these debates were linked to anxieties in mainland France—see Conklin; Conklin et al; Chaperon; Gaudio; and Martin.

<sup>68</sup> Other examples are Kaoma and Cheney, who each argue that upsurge in homophobia and its political mobilization is imported from the United States, primarily by evangelical groups. They state that homophobia on the African continent is fueled by the belief that homosexuality is an import from the West and augmented by a concern about fertility rates. Other scholars demonstrate how homophobia is stoked by associating with external (i.e. Western, non-African) ways of life are Ahlberg and Kulane (2011, p. 36), and Teunis (2001; pp. 174-75).



sexual practices. Recuperating this history—a move which requires expanding the imagination to understand sexual and affective intimacy as practices and relationships that do not necessarily follow a heterosexual template—changes the temporal understanding of sexuality. It changes the narrative where European and North American countries are the paradigms of progress and progressive human rights, while the global south is relegated to the role of playing catch-up.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Queer Territories of Longing***

*Kétala* renders palpable the inhospitability of both diaspora and nation as territories of attachment for anyone who cannot fit into the dominant, heteronormative gender relations. Mémoria is adrift, unable to fit into any of the sexual and relational structures that are embedded within a national or diasporic affinity. Mahkou loves and admires her, but does not desire her sexually; she burns with unfulfilled sexual desire, but finds herself emotionally and physically drained when she turns sex into her trade. She is neither wife nor lover nor mother, and when her family discovers what she has been doing in Europe, she is no longer a daughter, either: all the social and sexual roles available to Mémoria lead, literally, to a dead end. And yet, she stubbornly refuses to give up on any of them, refusing to formally divorce Mahkou or even tell her family the state of their relationship, and rejecting his advice to find a (heterosexual) partner that can love her the way she wants to be loved.

It would be easy to dismiss her obstinate insistence that Mahkou is the only man she can love and start a family with as childish, self-destructive, homophobic or some combination of the three. However, I argue that the narrative labor of the material belongings in *Kétala* invites, instead, a radical reconfiguration of the modes of belonging proposed by both nation and diaspora. This radical reconfiguration is what I will call an act of queering. Queering, in this

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<sup>69</sup> See Hoad (2007), notably the Introduction

chapter, will express a modification of both the *object of desire* as well as the *direction of desire* away from the subject's expected Other, in such a way that heteronormative and patriarchal norms, structures, and relationships are excavated and undermined. This is loose definition perhaps, but intentionally so, as I will argue that it is this very mobility that opens space for disidentificatory attachments.

As the material belongings map out Mémoria's wanderings through her affective relations in different geographic spaces, they queer the sexual and romantic territories that Mémoria traverses. Part of this queering is a formal one: the material objects tell the story on Mémoria's life through the form of a roots narrative, but in so doing, they change the direction of the narrative desire and expectation. When the storytelling begins, Masque tells the other objects that they will "tous ensemble, reconstituer le puzzle de [la] vie [de Mémoria]" [put together the puzzle of Mémoria's life] (22), of which each of them hold a piece, so that they can carry it with it to their new homes. In other words, they seek to understand the past in order to be able to transmit it to a future generation. This mimics the form of roots narratives, which, whether seeking to establish a temporal or geographic origin, are often one of the key cultural products of the diasporic experience.

Roots narratives provide ways of claiming affinity to a place or time that is elsewhere; they provide an answer to the question "Where is home?" and "Where are you from" at the same time. However, as Hayes notes, "whereas roots narratives claim merely to discover an origin that preexists the search for and so-called discovery of roots, the telling of the story is actually what creates the origins and, indeed, identity is rooted in them. [...] roots narratives narrate a 'return' to a 'prior' origin that is actually *not* prior since it is an *effect* of the narration, not its cause" (3, 19). *Kétala* exemplifies precisely this type of narrative, that traces the journey of Mémoria's life

in order to understand where she belongs. I argue, the roots produced by the material belongings narration are queer roots: “Queer roots, in other words, are origins that are not original; queer diasporas exist through ‘returns’ to these origins-that-are-not-origins” (Hayes 19). The material belongings’ storytelling of Mémoria’s migrations queer the notion of return by displacing the signifiers of home and abroad because, as I will demonstrate, Mémoria’s “return” home is a heterosexual exile yet a queer homecoming.

One sign of these queer roots is revealed when the objects put together is why Mémoria left Senegal in the first place: to, as I mentioned, have a “real” (i.e. heteronormative) married life. This is reversal of narrative expectations, as the “progressive” West tends to be painted as the asylum for *homosexual* bodies under fire, if not the very source of homosexuality. Gopinath speaks of a recurring “developmental, progress narrative of ‘gay’ identity formation that posits the diaspora as a space of sexual freedom over and against the (home) nation as a space for sexual oppression” (14). It is thus not insignificant that threat of homosexuality in *Kétala* is not located in West but in the neighborhood, through the queer body of Mémoria’s closest friend and Mahkou’s lover, the Gambian Tamara/Tamsir. Queer (sexual) desire in *Kétala* is thus not produced by moving from Africa to the West, but through an internal crossing of borders.<sup>70</sup> Since homosexuality comes from home, Mémoria’s move abroad is an attempt to re-route desire, a part of her plan of to “débusqué le mâle à l’état de nature” [flush out the male to his natural state] (Diome 126).

Leaving the home nation is thus, for Mémoria, paradoxically, not a space of sexual freedom, but a search to re-establish heteronormative sexual origins: a ‘return’ to

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<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, Gambia’s borders lie within Senegal and are one of the most blatant examples of borders that were established according to an economic rather than linguistic, cultural, or topographic logic. It was the division of land between Britain and France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that formed a separate but embedded nation.

heteromascularity. The problem is that, as Mémoria's statue Coumba Djiguène testifies, this 'original' heteromascularity cannot be 'returned' to since it has not *yet* existed: Mahkou's only sexual experiences have been queer ones. Meanwhile, for the character Mahkou, longing for the "home nation" is a queer longing for the transvestite lover he left behind. This is similarly a re-routing of narrative expectations: going home would be returning to a queer lifestyle. Thus, queer desire and heterosexual desire are displaced from the territories that they normally signify. Queering diaspora, according to Gopinath, may begin "unmasking and undercutting [diaspora's] dependence of a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic" (10). I argue that by displacing those desires, the novel makes this move of undercutting diaspora's dependence on implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic. It turns both the nation and diaspora away from their implicitly acceptable objects of desire.

The changing of the direction of desire is, in fact, what happens in Europe, but not the way Mémoria expects it. In Europe, there is not a *return* but a *re-orientation* of the language of home and (be)longing. Mahkou does not settle into a "real married life" with Mémoria; he meets a Frenchman named Max and ends up starting a relationship with him. However, before Mahkou runs away with Max, he and Mémoria take a striking journey through affective territories. In their apartment in Strasbourg, Mémoria begins inviting Mahkou to read and role-play the erotic novels she discovers in France. One evening, swept up by the game, they have sex, for the first and only time. It is worth noting the language used to describe the effects their heterosexual genital-on-genital intimacy has on Mahkou. In the morning, before leaving for work, he leaves a note on the pillow for Mémoria that reads, "Merci, chérie, pour cette merveilleuse nuit. Tu m'as fait découvrir une contrée que j'ai toujours crue hors de portée" [Thank you, darling, for this wonderful night. You made me discover a land that I always thought was out of reach] (195). I

was struck by Makhou's evocation of a territory, a land that is out of reach. His heterosexual desire and intimacy is not formulated as a *return* to a pure, natural state of heteromascularity but as a *discovery*. Even more importantly, it is not a destination but a detour. Though he temporarily inhabits the space of Mémoria's desires, letting his affective and erotic territories be shaped by hers, this is not the homecoming that Mémoria hoped it would be. Makhou never again desires Mémoria, and soon after leaves her for Max.

The image of homecoming resurfaces at the end of the novel, after Makhou does return to Senegal to take care of Mémoria on her deathbed. This homecoming is nevertheless a profoundly queer one, as the coming home is also a coming out. Makhou finally tells his family about his male lovers and moves in with Tamara. The text states, "Tamara était le fleuve qui continuait d'irriguer et de fleurir l'existence de Makhou, *une terre* où se récoltait un amour pur, renforcé par le souvenir de Mémoria" [Tamara was a river that continued to irrigate and make Makhou's existence blossom, a land whose harvest was true love, reinforced by the memory of Mémoria] (286). It is important to note that both Mémoria's cis-female (but childless) body and Makhou's bisexual male body are associated with a nourishing land, an image that is usually associated with heteronormative motherhood as well as nationhood (the motherland), and that Tamara's transgendered body is imagined as irrigating this land. Each of these territories are, at different moments, homes and foreign lands; they are at times out of reach and at times softly entered. They embody, following Muñoz, disidentificatory desires in all their ambivalent energy.

The novel, in other words, makes a radical case for homegrown homosexuality—of queer kinship, more precisely—in Senegal, not only through Mémoria, Makhou, and Tamara's relationships, but through the object that belonged, at one point, to each of them: the wooden carving of a female bust, Coumba Djiguène. "Djiguène" means "woman" in Wolof. One of the

common names for men who have sex with men in Senegal is “gor-djiguène” meaning manwoman. Accounts of gor-djiguène appear in European and African ethnographies of Senegal starting in the late nineteenth century, and descriptions of menwomen also appear in Senegalese literature.<sup>71</sup> Though *Kétala* does not name her as such, Tamara displays many of the traits associated with gor-djiguène: a brilliant dancer, highly sought-out conversationalist, providing entertainment and advice for Dakar’s high society, the best-dressed and best-coiffed among the women--but also the subject of envy and ambivalence.<sup>72</sup>

The statue Coumba Djiguène narrates to the other material objects belonging to Mémoria the story that Tamara tells Mémoria when she “comes out” to her. Tamara’s coming-out narrative functions much like the roots narrative that the material objects are putting together. Coumba Djiguène tells the other objects how Tamara traces for Mémoria the physical, sexual, and affective violence that Tamara-as-Tamsir was exposed to by her father in his efforts to “correct” her sexual and gender nonconforming practices in Gambia. This hostility leads Tamara to flee Gambia for Senegal with Mahkou; they are able to pass by unnoticed by the border guards because Tamara dresses as a woman and wraps up Coumba Djiguène as a baby. For Tamara, like for Mémoria, home is not found through a genealogical narration that traces back through

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<sup>71</sup> Reports on homosexual and non-gender conforming practices in Senegal have tended to be contradictory in their definitions of gor-djiguènes and their role in Senegalese society—likely because the authors were themselves ambivalent if not outright homophobic. Gorer (36) describes the gor-djiguène (gor-digen in his spelling) as being generally well-regarded in society, though excluded from Muslim burials, and Crowder (68) makes similar observations. Cheik Niang (p. 505) reports that *ibis* and *yooos* are the terms self-chosen by men who have sex with men, and that gor-djiguène tends to be how outsiders (non-MSM) label them; when heard in present-day Senegal, Niang’s interviewees reported, it usually means insults will follow. Teunis (160) reports very similar definitions. Menwomen in Senegal are mentioned in, for example, Ken Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou*, Mariam Bâ’s *Un chant écarlate*, and Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*. See Hayes (pp. 87-97) for a comprehensive bibliography and analysis of several key sources that discuss menwomen in Senegal and West Africa.

<sup>72</sup> From Gorer: “They are called in Wolof men-women, gor-digen, and do their best to deserve the epithet by their mannerisms, their dress and their make-up; some even dress their hair like women. They do not suffer in any way socially, through the Mohammedans refuse them religious burial; on the contrary, they are sought after as the best conversationalists and the best dancers” (36).

generations of blood kinship. Instead, her sense of being and belonging are made possible through practices of coming-home and home-making that are intimately tied to telling stories of coming-out and the material objects that provide the conditions for such journey *and* their retellings.<sup>73</sup> Though Mémoria initially rejects the Tamara’s friendship after she comes out to her, jealous of Tamara’s relationship with Mahkou, in the end, Mémoria comes “home” to Dakar where her final days are spent not under the care of her biological family, but of Mahkou and Tamara.

### ***Queer Matters of Belonging(s)***

I take the time to discuss Mémoria and Mahkou’s sexual intimacy for two reasons. First, because through this episode, *Kétala* intertwines a longing for home with sexual longing. As discussed above, the mobile and queer orientation of sexual desire in *Kétala* reconfigures the meaning of a diasporic longing for home, where “home” is both found and lost abroad, and the longing for home manifests itself as both a homosexual and heterosexual orientation of desire. The longing for home and the sexual longing form and inform each other, transforming their orientation and their territories of attachment. This profoundly queer articulation of diaspora, as Gopinath puts it, “recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries” (11). Queering the longing for home—and the considering the queerness of home—“becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, and nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora” (11).

This in of itself is radical and radically important given my argument that *Kétala* can be

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<sup>73</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the parallels between a diasporic coming-home and coming-out, see Bénédicte Boisseron’s *Creole Renegades* (2014) particularly the chapter “Maryse Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale: Coming Out in the French Antilles*.”

read as opening avenues of attachment that work around current borders of identification drawn by both a nationalistic identification and a diasporic formation in our postcolonial present.

However, what I want to emphasize is that it is the specifically *material* mourning that the text performs that allows this disidentificatory reading of diaspora and desire, in a way that not only queers the templates of heterosexual and homosexual relationships, but the relationship between human and nonhuman.

By the essential role of material mourning, I mean in part that Mémoria's belongings are the only ones that have the power to tell the story of her intimate attachments, since they have a privileged proximity to her body: for example, it is Oreiller, the pillow that graces Mémoria's bed, that tells the story of her night with Mahkou. However, beyond filling a void, this material mourning allows the text to open up a different way of thinking about personhood—much like Sarah Doraghi's pillow does at the National Museum of the History of immigration (see Chapter One). As the text moves on, what emerges through the transposition of the narrative voice onto nonhuman material bodies is not a mere objects-substituting-for-humans, but rather an unbinding of the ontological distinctions between human and nonhuman material bodies, through an elucidation of a relationship of *belonging*. For what binds together these immensely disparate objects—a handkerchief, a TV, a dining set, a *pagne*, a couch; some factory made, some family heirlooms, some purchased in France—is that they belonged to Mémoria. There is no category that would give salience to the collection of objects other than their common owner; without her, they are a meaningless jumble. Collections, then, are also the effects of roots narratives: who they belonged to and how they belonged to someone is the story that gets told after the fact.

What is also interesting, though, is the horizontality of the relationship between these human and nonhuman bodies: the objects belong to Mémoria, but she belongs to the objects as



well. The couch upholstery contains the dried tears she once shed; her pillow is pressed to the shape of her arms and chest as she slept with it held tight; the heels of her boots are bent to the pressure of her feet when she walked the cobblestone streets of Strasbourg, Paris, and Marseille. She left her trace in them, on them, and likewise, the objects realize, “Ce tas d'affaires, c'était tout ce qui restait de Mémoria, les seules marques tangibles de son passage sur terre” [This pile of belonging was all that remained of Mémoria, the only tangible traces of her time on earth] (Diome 281). The objects, in their physicality, do more than bear witness; they bear (carry in them) and lay bare (expose through their matter) the marks of her life in a way that no other being, human or nonhuman, is able to. As a collective body, they are Mémoria's remains; but if they are separated, no trace will remain of her. Her being, in other words, is constituted via the physical impressions she has left on them just as they are shaped by her.

Thus, the practice of mourning that *Kétala* illustrates is one in which those markers of mutual constitution between human being and nonhuman material object are noted and narrated. This practice allows the reader to “begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” (Bennett 10). Moving toward a horizontal relationship, in which agency is distributed across an assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies suggests a co-dependent, interactive model of belonging. We can think here of Bill Brown, who speaks of “a social relationship neither between men nor between things, but something like a social relation between human subject and inanimate object, wherein modernity's ontological distinction between human beings and nonhumans makes no sense” (451). What *Kétala* presents is Mémoria and her belongings functioning as a heterogeneous assemblage of human and nonhuman material bodies.

Here, Spinoza's ontological vision of the world, in which things—people, material

objects, organic and inorganic substances—are associative bodies that exist and “act” not alone but via their effects on other bodies, is clarifying. Jane Bennett draws on this vision to suggest that “agency” or the will to act is not a human-centered force but a vibrant materiality. Bodies, human and non human, Bennett proposes, are *modes*: “to be a ‘mode,’ then, is to form alliances and make assemblages: it is to mod(e)ify and be modified by others” (22). This vision resonates with the relationship that Mémoria and her belongings have in *Kétala*, since it appears that it is not only Mémoria’s life story but her very being that is a cause and effect of her belongings.

However, what is important to note is that this is not a relationship of domination; while we may be able to identify and observe the effects of Mémoria’s actions and emotions, we also see how these were formed, influenced, made possible by her belongings—like the erotic books and sexy clothes that Mémoria calls into action to momentarily alter the course of Mahkou’s desire. Indeed, Bennett contends that the properties that distinguish human beings and nonhuman material things—particularly their ability to act, to produce effects, to be *actants* if not agents—flow back and forth between the two categories of human and non-human, rather than being located primarily in the human.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, is not so much that the objects are privy to Mémoria’s inner thoughts but that they can get close to her thoughts, approach them, feel them rather than observe them. The material objects, despite embodying the authority of narrative voice, are neither all-knowing nor definitive, and the knowledge they do have does not come from a unidirectional observation. To give an example, the light robe that Mémoria wears as she packs up her Dakarois home to move to France on an impossibly hot day, remembers: “Comme elle me portait, j’étais imbibée d’une

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<sup>74</sup> Of course, as Bennett points out, different materialities express power differently: “Humans, for example, can experience themselves as forming intentions and as standing apart from their actions to reflect on the latter” (31). But Bennett emphasizes that even processes of reflection is inseparable from the material environment that shapes them. See Bernard Stiegler *The Technics and Time* (1998).

sueur aussi abondante que l'espérance qui *l'habitait*" [Since she wore me, I was drenched in the sweat that was as profuse as the hope that *lived* in her] (129; italics mine). Soaking up Mémoria's sweat and clinging to her body, the robe is able to experience the intensity of Mémoria's hopes and desires for the future. The hope that *inhabits* Mémoria is felt and lived (not observed) by the robe via the effects it has on its tissue. What the robe and the other belongings share with Mémoria is best understood as intense, intimate flashes of feeling that participate in that mutual constitution that Peter Stallybrass so eloquently describes when he notes that in the industry-speak of tailors in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, "the wrinkles in the elbow of a jacket or sleeve were called 'memories.' Those wrinkles recorded the body that had inhabited the garment. They memorized the interaction, the mutual constitution, of person and thing" (196). This multisensory and tactile engagement speaks to a mode of meaning-making that resists a sense of being based on what is visible. .

This mutual constitution of subjectivity particularly salient in a postcolonial, racialized context of personhood. For as Frantz Fanon famously theorized, it is the gaze of the colonizer—a gaze that regards the colonized subject as indelibly Other—that calls into being the personhood of the (post)colonial subject, structuring how the subject sees their self. In Fanon's articulation of the colonial gaze, this gaze penetrates: it dismembers the subject and entirely destabilizes his relationship to the material world. *Kétala* articulates another way of being with an Other. The objects' practice of mourning is the opposite of penetrating, as it is based not on "a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision" (Bhabha 66) but on an intimate co-dwelling. The belongings re-member rather than dis-member Mémoria by recounting not what they saw, but how their materialities acted upon each other. This suggests a mode of being that is not founded on (self) recognition but on collective

dwelling; not a splitting of resemblance and difference, but a tugging, bending, shaping of material bodies over time.

What is emphasized is both the materiality of humanity—that in the end, humans are material bodies like their inanimate belongings—and the humanity of materiality. Thus, the objects function not solely as witnesses but as embodiments of Mémoria’s personhood: “Chacun de nous est une trace de l’histoire de Mémoria; si on nous sépare les uns des autres, il ne restera plus rien de notre maîtresse” [Each one of us is a trace of Mémoria’s story; if they separate us from each other, nothing will remain of our mistress] (17). The material objects’ co-dwelling makes the narrative voice possible. The objects must stay together, continue working in an assemblage, to practice the work of mourning, which is to build bridges across “Un vide créé par la mort et la désormais impossible interactivité du *je* avec un *tu* sans intention” [A vacuum brought by death, in which *I* can longer interact with *you*] (9). In the end, this is the home and the lineage that Mémoria finds: not a marriage and family with Mahkou, but a chorus of objects that compose and re-compose her life story. Existing as a collection, the objects in *Kétala* continually claim and reclaim the relationship of belonging even in Mémoria’s absence, insisting on the mournability of her body.

### ***Wounds of Belonging(s)***

So far in this chapter, I have argued that the relationship between the human characters in *Kétala* and the nonhuman material objects in the novel queer the heteronormative principles of “nation” and “diaspora” as collective identities that can be called upon to organize affinities, attachments, and claims of being and belonging for postcolonial African subjects. In the following sections, I will suggest that in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, the relationships between the human characters and their material belongings invites a practice of solidarity that does not depend on a shared experience of culture, racialization, geography, gender, or sexuality

that national and diasporic identities assume—even though the novel traces how such experiences are each at certain points vectors for exploitation. Of particular importance will be the narrative power of materiality in eliciting sympathies, desires, and affinities through the embodied process of reading.

Abani's novella interrogates the interaction of humans and belongings in a process of a material mourning that is at once belated and preemptive. The novella is set in contemporary Lagos and London, following the coming of age of another young woman, Abigail. The narrative oscillates between chapters labeled "Then" and "Now." The "Then" is set in Nigeria, where Abigail lived for the first thirteen years of her life, while those that are "Now" take place in England. Yet even the "Now" is told belatedly, catching up to the narrative present only at the final pages of the novella. The narrative folding over of time and place is mirrored by a material folding over of time and place through Abigail's very body, as she is named for her mother, Abigail, who died giving birth to her. In the same breath that Abigail the daughter came to life, Abigail the mother died, but did not disappear. For the longer that Abigail the daughter lives, the more her body, movements, and facial features come to resemble the previous Abigail, a fact she is acutely aware of thanks to her widowed father's gaze: "[Her father] turned and looked at her and she saw it and recognized what it was. She looked so much like her mother that when he saw her suddenly, she knew he wanted her to be Abigail" (22). Through the "Then" chapters, we learn that Abigail's father, unable to stand her resemblance to her mother, sends her to London to live with her mother's cousin, hanging himself shortly before she departs.

In London, Abigail's life takes a turn for the worse. Instead of sending her to school as promised, Peter, her mother's cousin's husband, pimps her out. When she fights back, he punishes her by stripping her naked and tying her in the doghouse in the yard in the middle of

winter. He visits daily—twice daily—to feed her rotten food, rancid water, to pee on her and rape her. On the fifteenth day of this torture, she bites off his penis and makes a run for it. She is found fainted on the streets and taken to social services where she is assigned a caseworker, Derek, a mild-mannered middle-aged and married man. Abigail and Derek have an affair, Derek's wife catches them in the act of passion, and Derek ends up in jail since Abigail is a minor, just fourteen years old. Despite Abigail's protests that she willingly participated in their romantic and sexual relation, the jury condemns Derek as guilty. In the final pages, Abigail flicks the ash of her cigarette into the Thames and follows down after it to the dark waters.

Abani's gift as a writer is his ability to evoke the stark brutality of slow-burning abuses layered on a single human body, while leaving space open for flashes of hope, desire, and intimacy. Part of Abani's writerly power is to subsume the intensity of the reading experience through restraint: in fragments, and repeated bits of phrases. Often, simile or metaphor anchor the fragment, such as in the third phrase of the novella, "This memory like all others was a lie. Like the sound of someone ascending wooden stairs" (19). Comparing feelings and facts to sounds, and sounds to tactile sensations, the reading experience in *Becoming Abigail* is one that calls upon a deep investment in the sensorial imagination. This repetition and cross-modal sensorial attention creates a haunting effect—perhaps heightened, in my own reading experience, by the curious effect of reading one's own name in the printed words of a novel.

Nevertheless, the unruly metamorphosis of the material and the intangible point to a practice of material mourning that creates its own language of belonging. The Abigail in Abani's novella is alienated from her own body, and her mourning practices serve to negotiate this detachment as well as the attachment to her mother's ghost. Given the doubling of Abigail and her mother, in mourning her mother Abigail seems to be mourning her own future death—or

perhaps it is that the young Abigail's life is stillborn, a lingering echo of her mother's. Chambers suggests that haunting is the narrative effect of an inability to mourn. If so, Abani's text is doubly haunted. Mourning is normally a belated process; here, it is preemptive as well, anticipating Abigail's death while making up for the loss of her mother as well. The question that *Becoming Abigail* thus poses is what language is there for laying your own body to rest, when one is barely acknowledged as being alive? When one, in other words, recognizes the unmournability of one's body? Such an unmournable narrative would have to somehow "get [itself] read, but without comprising [its] wrongness, the means by which they signify, which is what would occur if they made themselves too readily readable. Thus even their readability, in the end, must be somehow wrong" (Chambers 289).

Abigail seeks to make mourning meaningful by practicing tracing gestures that bring her mother's material shape into her present material surrounding while also making room in those present surrounding for a life of her own. attempts to imagine her mother as a mappable territory. Maps, for the young Abigail, were "[h]er favorite thing. The only thing she read" (31). Initially, we know that Abigail loves maps without knowing why. The explanation comes later in the novella: "This drew Abigail to maps. [...] the black lines of science, pretending that here, at least, on the flat spread of the map, it was possible to have any kind of dominion over a landscape. Over things" (73). Maps render land visible, even the distant and ghostly territories. There is an element of pretense, of course—"black lines of science, *pretending*"—but like good fiction, maps create a world that can be held in one's hands. In the same way, Abigail seeks to make the shape of her mother emerge through maps. When Abigail looks at the map, "sometimes the alchemy of her stare transmuted the parchment into her mother's skin" (73). Following the lines of the map with her eyes, Abigail traces the shape of her mother's body through the forms

of the map, assigning each body part a territory, and “Everything else became the imagined contours of her inner life” (74). The spectral presence of her mother metamorphoses into a material object that can be seen, traced with her fingers, and measured—without relying on a mimetic visual representation, something that will be essential in the discussion of collective mourning in the next chapter.

The relationship that Abigail builds between her (present) body and her mother’s (absent) body oscillates between tracing gestures that exteriorize her mother’s self onto material objects, and shaping gestures that embed her mother’s self onto her own body. Both the tracing and shaping gestures are deeply tactile ones, in which Abigail’s body carves into, wrinkles, cuts, and smooths out other material bodies. This tugging and pulling and shaping is a reaction to absence of the previous Abigail, and absence that initially overwhelms her: “The shape of that Abigail was so clearly marked, the limits traced out in the stories that filled the world around this Abigail, that it was hard to do anything but try to fill the hollowed-out shape” (47). When she is still young and living with her father, Abigail collected anecdotes about her mother, gathering these stories from everyone who knew her by trading her labor for a story. She writes the stories that she collects on scraps of paper and hides them under clothes, letting them scrape off her skin, leaving scars: “Chaffing. Becoming. Becoming and chaffing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of joining, until she became her mother and her mother her” (36). This doubling—and the *décalage* in the doubling—that Abigail longs for is engraved in the structure of the sentences, which form near-anagrams. “Chaffing-becoming-becoming-[and]-chaffing,” or “her-mother-and-[her]-mother-her.” In trying to occupy the same space, to be a perfect mirror image, there’s a stutter, a tick, a wrinkle that betrays.



And so, Abigail changes her tactic, using material objects now to widen rather than efface the *décalage* between her mother and her, and eventually make room for a story that is her own. In *Kétala*, there are vivid passages that describe how Mémoria's body shaped her belongings, left her trace on them. In *Becoming Abigail*, it is the opposite that takes the spotlight—objects leave their mark on the human body. The scrapes and ink from the scraps of inky paper that told her mother's story fade too quickly from Abigail's body, "That was when she discovered the permanence of fire" (36). She begins burning words on her skin, or sometimes simply letting a cigarette burn a mark. However, in discovering the malleability of her flesh, Abigail begins inscribing her own story rather than her mother's onto her body. Immediately after having sex with her caseworker, Derek, Abigail takes a needle to the fire and uses it to burn a series of tiny dots all over her body, creating lines. When Derek discovers the freshly-burnt dots, she explains:

'This one,' she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. 'This one is you, this, me. In the middle in Greenwich. Here,' and she was down on her stomach, 'is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's.' [...] And he traced her in that moment, the map of her, the skin of her world, as she emerged in pointillism. Emerging in parts of a whole. Each. Every. 55

The gesture Abigail performs here is one of both tracing and shaping—tracing because it is a gesture that outlines and renders legible her body, and shaping because it changes the materiality of her flesh (live tissue to scar tissue, smooth to bumps) and makes Abigail *emerge*. Deleuze and Guattari speak of *agencement*, the material envelope, so to speak, that makes the passing of a message possible.<sup>75</sup> There is a message that Abigail passes through the marking of her own body. The message of *being alive*, of being a living body that hungers and yearns and attempts to find a way to belong in this world. The traces she embeds into her body are both visible and intimate, on the surface of her skin yet on the most intimate parts that few can see. They are signs of both

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<sup>75</sup> See Chambers *Untimely Interventions* (pp. 13-14).

the existence of the frontiers of her body and the proof that these boundaries, “the skin of her world,” can be punctured (55).

This gesture, I argue, is a territorializing of Abigail’s body, making it mournable by holding in tension individual desire with collective agencement. The marks on her body are a method of claiming a pain, a sorrow, a need that is all her own, not even her mother’s. At the same time, the method is dependent on the materiality of her body in relation to other bodies. She has learned, we have already been told, about the permanence of fire and metal, in contrast to the solubility of ink and paper. It may be useful here to think of Réda Bensmaïa’s words on Kafka’s writings as emblematic of a writing from the margins wherein writing is “no longer an art that proposes to ‘express’ (a meaning), to ‘represent’ (a thing, a being), or ‘imitate’ (a nature). It is rather a method (of writing)—of picking up, even of stealing: of ‘double stealing’ as Deleuze sometimes says, which is both ‘stealing’ and ‘stealing away’” (18). What is Abigail stealing? She is stealing time in both directions (her mother’s past death, her future death). And she is stealing her body away—“She who had been taken and taken and taken” (Abani 119)—from Peter and all the men who exploited and used her body and if it were a body without desire. Or a not even a body at all: “It was like she didn’t exist. And she didn’t, because Peter had used a fake passport and a forged visa to bring her into the country and she was registered everywhere under that fake name, a name she had forgotten. She was a ghost” (112). By giving desire—hunger, need, lust—a tangible form on her flesh, she creates room for an oppositional telling of her life.

What I suggest is that in *Becoming Abigail*, the material frailty of the human body

becomes a vector for an oppositional narration,<sup>76</sup> rendering the unmournable mournable. Chambers points specifically to the holding of attention—a commanding of space and energy—in a narrative situation as a kind of authority or power. Furthermore, he argues that reading can “change desire; ‘reading’ is the name of the practice that has the power of producing shifts in desire; and desire does not produce just ‘fantasy’ but reality itself” (xii). An oppositional narration, in transforming the desire of its other, changes the sympathies of the reader in a way that can produce a different reality. This is not unlike what Hoad suggests in his reading of *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, a novel that, he argues, engages in “the political work of reconfiguring of the meaning of death of young black South Africans” (117). The novel is an elegy to Hillbrow, an impoverished township in Cape Town, home to many migrants coming from the countryside. It is spoken by one of the characters in the novel and addressed to another character after he dies from AIDS. Hoad notes that in that novel, sexual and nonsexual intimacy between the characters—all of whom are outsiders in this already marginal space—is often described in terms of body parts—limbs, genitals, facial features—interacting, penetrating, and rubbing against each other. Rather than reading this as an objectifying move on the text’s part, Hoad argues that what emerges is a shared, physical vulnerability that extends beyond the confines of the textual space: “the frailty of the flesh becomes universal and the cultural, national, moral, and gendered differences needed to police the reader’s sympathy may fall away” (121). The

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<sup>76</sup> In Chambers’ *Room for Maneuver*, he speaks of oppositionality as a complicit *tactic* in the face of an oppressive manifestation of power. In contrast to resistance, which is a strategy to overcome power through a same and equal force, oppositionality accommodates power to achieve its own ends: “Oppositional practices help us to maintain *some* sense of dignity and personhood. What this means, however, is that oppositional practices do not really work against prevailing systems but, to the contrary, strengthen them by making them livable” (7). Chambers draws on De Certeau to think about systems and power and the ways in which narration navigates these relationships. Narration itself is embedded in a structure of power—the narrator exercising narrative author-ity over the text and the narratee. What Chambers suggests is that “oppositional narrative, in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to *change its other* (the ‘narratee’ if one will), through the achievement and maintenance of authority in ways that are potentially radical” (12).

storytelling that takes place in *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, thus, functions as a kind of oppositional tactic, in which one of the markers (disease) that renders the bodies of the characters unmournable becomes reterritorialized as the common ground inhabited not only by the characters in the text but by a potential reader of the text.

I see a similar move enacted in *Becoming Abigail*, when Abigail uses the frailty of her flesh to make her yearning emerge. Hoad in his analysis of *Welcome to our Hillbrow* notes that, “To engage in love, and sex, and to be desiring subjects is to share in this vulnerability” (124). In Abani’s novel, in modifying her flesh with objects, Abigail claims her part in this shared vulnerability. To some degree, Abigail’s vulnerability is imposed, due to chance, due to the cruel intentions of others, and due to prevailing systems of power and how they intersect to exploit young Black and immigrant women. Her telling of her relationship with Derek does not resist—seek to change, via equal force—the systems of power that rendered her experience of migration vulnerable in gendered ways, but it does oppose them in making room within them for her personhood to emerge. What Abigail does in working wounds into her flesh is signal the degree and the direction in which her body’s vulnerability is not only imposed, but also chosen. It is chosen because it is proper to the state of being alive and to belonging—to being in relation to someone other than the self.

In Derek’s trial, Abigail pleads on his behalf, testifying and writing letters saying that she *chose* this. Her pleas fall on deaf ears, because the jurors rule “that [Abigail] didn’t know what choice was. But she did. She who had been taken and taken and taken. And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had choice in the matter, it was taken away. Maybe, she thought, maybe some of us are just here to feed others” (118). The law, once upon a time not so long ago, allowed for a white man to take a black girl, of Abigail’s age or even younger, and do

what he please with her body. The law no longer condones such action, but *Becoming Abigail* shows how the law still gets to decide, for a young black woman, what she gets to do with her body. It is against that denial of choice that Abigail places herself in opposition, insisting on the degree to which her vulnerability is chosen, invited, desired.

I think about my own sympathies as a reader, what structures and experiences police them, as I read *Becoming Abigail*. Abani's text does not offer easy answers—quite the opposite, he is a master of unsettlement and of evincing the subtleties of power relations. I find it hard to swallow, difficult to write even, about a fourteen-year old girl, orphaned, forced to immigrate, sexually abused, then becoming intimate with her middle-aged married male case-worker and not see an abuse of power; I find it onerous to not say, like the jurors, that any consent Abigail gives is voided by lack of choice that her situation affords. However, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley speaks of the intimate relationships formed in transatlantic slave ships between enslaved men, enslaved women, and also between enslaved persons and the slaver crew members. She argues that “these erotic relationships are neither metaphors nor sources of disempowerment. Instead, they are one way that fluid black bodies refused to accept that the liquidation of their social selves — the colonization of oceanic and body waters — meant the liquidation of their sentient selves” (199). In the context of contemporary human trafficking, the love that Abigail professes, like the relationships in *Kétala* could be read as a just such an oppositional queer love: “Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commoditized flesh was never supposed to” (Tinsley 199).

Indeed, Abani's text suggests that turning a deaf ear to Abigail's telling of her story that she burns on her flesh with such urgency is not something that, in the narrative situation that the text creates, seems possible, either. In fact, the text presents such a misreading of Abigail's story

as an act of narrative violence that Abigail refused to accommodate. A social worker at the courthouse, upon seeing Abigail distraught as Derek is escorted away, misunderstands Abigail's reaction and attempts to soothe her by saying "Don't you worry, sister, that monster is going away for a long time" (120). Abigail's response to this misreading of her anguish is an eloquent and elegant right hook to the woman's nose, an act that slides into the narration in a quiet line so quickly that it barely registers until the following line shows us Abigail licking blood off her hand. It is this narrative opposition that bears exploration. In framing Abigail's narrative as one of opposition within a limited room for maneuver, Abani's text creates a protagonist that makes a self emerge despite multiple dehumanizations, while placing the reader in complicity with the structures that exploited her. In other words, what Abani's text can offer, especially when read alongside *Kétala*, is a readerly position that does not take on the mantle of judgment, nor of hubris of a savior, but rather the dependency of an interpretive subject.

### ***The Other Event***

In *Untimely Interventions*, Chambers speaks of the resistance to what he calls discourses of extremity—a half-willed, half-unconscious cultural *detournement* of the stories emerge in the aftermath of events (in his examples, genocide, holocaust, and epidemics like AIDS) that reveal the “fault-lines” of society. The tendency, in what he calls aftermath cultures, is to quarantine off the event as an aberrance, to claim innocence as the state of normality rather listen to the voices that say this violence is a recurring character in their lives. I want to return now to something I said in the introduction of this chapter, when I spoke about two events that were coming, at similar paces, to the forefront of national attention during and after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. These are the migrant crisis (in Europe though I am speaking of France, specifically) and the

Black Lives Matters movement (in the USA).<sup>77</sup> One of the axes of protest in both of these movements was again the invisibility of non-white, non-European/Anglo-American bodies. The problem with combating invisibility with its obvious counterpart—hyper visibility—is the risk of becoming spectacle, as I will discuss in the following chapter. The preponderance of images of people of color that only become visible via the news, cinema, and culture at large, when they are broken and battered, can create the counter effect of normalizing the suffering of these lives. Furthermore, it can obfuscate the tragedy at the individual level by co-opting it for a collective, political purchase.

The balance between these two—invisibility, with the room to suffer privately, hypervisibility, with renunciation of individual suffering—is something that Claudia Rankine explores in her essay, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.” She discusses the choices that the mothers of two young black men, 50 years apart, made in the aftermath of their son’s violent deaths. When Emmet Till was lynched in 1955 in Mississippi, his mother Mamie Till Mobey insisted on an open-casket, public funeral that drew tens of thousands, to demonstrate the violence of her son’s death at the hand of a white mob. On the contrary, Theresa McFadden, Michael Brown’s mother, fought desperately to be able to get her son’s body off of the street in Ferguson where he had been shot dead by police officers, out of the evidence lab, and into her hands.<sup>78</sup> Rankine argues that this precisely is the central struggle of the Black Lives Matter

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<sup>77</sup> While the BLM movement was sparked by the death of a young black man, Michael Brown, and quickly tied it to numerous, previous deaths of other black men at the hands of police officers, a related movement emerged within it that called specifically for more attention of the deaths of black *women* at the hands of police officers. Say Her Name strove to flesh out the picture, naming the names of women who had lost their lives through state violence or without the intervention of state justice.

<sup>78</sup> As Rankine argues, “Mobley’s refusal to keep private grief private allowed a body that meant nothing to the criminal-justice system to stand as evidence. By placing both herself and her son’s corpse in positions of refusal relative to the etiquette of grief, she “disidentified” with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a warning to the black community, thereby using the lynching tradition against itself. The spectacle of the black body, in her hands, publicized the injustice mapped onto her son’s corpse. ‘Let the people see what I see,’ she said,

movement: “to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives” (June 22, 2015). The key here is the *openness* of mourning, that is to say, the open-endedness of the process. An insistence that lives still hang in the balance, that it is not a singular and completed episode of the past to which we need to find closure, but that the future is still at risk.

What the process of reterritorializing as mournable through an insistence on the (shared) materiality of human bodies can offer, I suggest, is precisely this keeping open; a kind of shared consciousness of the ongoing and inter-relational precarity of human life, that removes itself from the visibility/invisibility axis. Let me try saying it another way: speaking about the *unmournability*, rather than the *invisibility*, of certain bodies can create a structure of feeling that invites the reader to recognize in themselves both a measure of complicity—a contribution to the context that has created both suffering and the erasure of the suffering—as well a measure of empathy for those who suffer. It might keep alive the personal, private, individual dimension of pain that these deaths bring; a pain that is complex and contradictory, whose subversive nuances risk being pushed aside when they are recuperated to make a collective point.

As fate would have it, the day I was brushing the final broad strokes on the earliest version of this chapter was the same day that a second violent eruption took place in Paris. On the Friday evening of November 13, 2015, 130 people were killed in a series of shootings and

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adding, ‘I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me.’ [...] McSpadden, unlike Mamie Till Mobley, seemed to have little desire to expose her son’s corpse to the media. Her son was not an orphan body for everyone to look upon. She wanted him covered and removed from sight. He belonged to her, her baby. After Brown’s corpse was finally taken away, two weeks passed before his family was able to see him. This loss of control and authority might explain why after Brown’s death, McSpadden was supposedly in the precarious position of accosting vendors selling T-shirts that demanded justice for Michael Brown that used her son’s name. Not only were the procedures around her son’s corpse out of her hands; his name had been commoditized and assimilated into our modes of capitalism.” (Rankine, June 22, 2015)



suicide attacks at several restaurants and a concert hall in the densely frequented 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissements of Paris, as well as in the Stade de France just outside of Paris, during a France-Germany soccer match. These were quickly identified as terrorist attacks, the organization Daesh released a statement claiming responsibility for the attack, and as the investigation continued, it was revealed that the assailants were young men that had been recruited by Daesh and fought in Syria.

Even more so that with the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, there was an immediate, transnational response, messages of solidarity, altars, moments of silence. That 130 could die in one fell eruption of violence was perhaps unsurprising; that it could happen in Paris touched a nerve, at least in the Western world. It was the *jouissance*, the *insouciance*, of going to a cafe terrace with a loved one on an unusually warm November evening, that was attacked, said many. But even more rapidly than in January, the reminders—sometimes voiced angrily, sometimes voiced self-righteously, sometimes simply voiced—that more media attention and political attention had been lavished on this one attack than on numerous, similar atrocities in other, non-Western parts of the world, notably a very similar suicide bombing in Beirut just days before, came streaming in. These voices insisted that drinking a glass of wine on a terrace is not an assault on a fundamental liberty, because that is a luxury; that that to another person, a more salient marker of liberty would be the ability to wear a veil without having one's professional prospects put at risk, without being subjected to the alienating regard of people who see your veil as a sign of your unwillingness to belong to the nation.

I admit that I am one of those voices, and I do not doubt the necessity of raising those voices. The question that remains, for me however, is how to affirm the mournability of those unmournable bodies in Beirut, in Syria, or here in the West from where I work and think and

write, in such a way that softens the resistance to thinking about any tragedy other than the one that hits closest to home, rather than entrenching the distance. How to affirm the mournability of *all* lives in such a way that does not blind us to the inequalities of suffering, that *some* lives are more frequently and more deeply at risk; how to practice solidarity in a way that *expands* our notion of fundamental human rights, rather than redrawing in stone the outlines of liberty. This is, I argue, what the processes of mourning enacted through *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail* invite the reader to do. To be more attuned to a mutual precarity, and a mutual dependency, unevenly distributed across an assemblage of bodies, to acknowledge moment of complicity and to believe that what touches one part of the field ripples out across it.

### Chapter Three: RETURN

#### *Discourses of extremity*

In the previous chapter, I began exploring how fiction portrays humans and objects acting as an assemblage with distributed agency. I argued that through this portrayal that is attuned to the power of material bodies, the stories that end up being told are ones that provide new modes of being and belonging in a diasporic experience. They provide these new modes of being and belonging by queering<sup>79</sup> the temporal and geographic orientation of diasporic desire, and they also deploy more capacious affective structures that allow the reading experience to open ways of creating networks of readerly solidarity that acknowledge complex relations of power and privilege. In this chapter, I press on this idea of humans and nonhuman material bodies working in assemblage, but I move the realm of exploration outside of the pages of literary narrative. I examine specifically the human-object assemblage's ability to represent historical events that fall outside of the scope of the normal human experience in commemorative exhibition spaces. Furthermore, the previous chapter considered the stories of two individuals that struggled to find a place in the memory of the nation they left behind but also struggled to make a home abroad. This chapter examines collective histories that contributed to the formation of a black African diasporic identity, but are also considered to be a part of universal history, and the tensions that

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<sup>79</sup> Through the work of Chapter 2, I use "queer" as a verb to describe the action of turning away from or undermining the relationship with the subject's other (e.g. woman as man's other, the colony at the metropole's other, a Black man as a White man's other) in a way that destabilizes patriarchal and heteronormative practices, structures, and meanings.

commemorating for both subject positions poses. These histories are those of transatlantic slavery and colonial exploitation of human labor and human life.

To set the stage for this storytelling of experiences that appear too far removed from the daily human experience to be adequately communicated in the fullness of their brutality and tragedy, we would do well to turn to Ross Chambers, whose work I discussed briefly in the previous chapter. I alluded to what Chambers calls *discourses of extremity*, and how these discourses pose particular obstacles to narrative affects. Chambers defines discourses of extremity as falling into a larger category of parasocial discourse, which he describes as, “discourse that addresses a culture assumed to be general, mainstream, or dominant on behalf of subjectivities identified as marginal or (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the word *minor*) minoritized” (33). The classic example he cites are narratives of holocaust survivors published as memoirs or represented in plays, movies, and other settings. Chambers argues that this type of discourse poses challenges both at the moment of enunciation—how can one possibly narrate such a traumatic event accurately and adequately—but, even more so, it poses challenges to reception. The difficulty lies less in saying and more in *making heard*. This unwillingness to receive (hear, see, absorb) such narratives springs from two sources: the narratives point to failures of the values of a dominant culture and are thus unwelcome stories; and the narratives appear so far removed from daily existence that they seem irrelevant or impossible to relate to.

Narratives (or other representations) of extremity thus, according to Chambers, must master the “art of untimely intervention, seeking to introduce an awareness of untimeliness into a culture that prefers to live in time as if the past had no place in the present and did not haunt (i.e., inhabit) it” (191). This is particularly necessary in what Chambers calls *aftermath cultures*, societies “regulated by a culture in which collectively traumatic events are denied, and if

necessary denied again” (xxi).<sup>80</sup> How then, can discourses of extremity awaken aftermath cultures and make the experiences of which they testify a central concern? How can they rework the understanding of culture as not one of uninterrupted evolutionary progress, but one in which disturbing events are as much a part of the fabric of culture as are the moments of humaneness? How, in other words, can they represent these events in such a way that they can be understood and accepted as the fault lines that define and shape the social continent?<sup>81</sup>

Chambers’s account of discourses of extremity and the challenges of narrating such discourses in aftermath cultures maps out well on the subject of this chapter: the transatlantic slave experience and colonialism. It is a part of global history that is considered to be both unforgettable and yet unspeakable. Like other collective traumatic events that resulted in the systematic loss of human life at the hands of other humans, there are frequent calls to commemorate it, and yet its conceptual impossibility puts it in constant danger of being forgotten. We must find a way to think the unthinkable—but how? I suggest that Chambers’ analysis of how testimonial writing navigates these challenges and this context can illuminate a reading of slave memorial sites and other sites of representation of this history. And, I will suggest, bringing his analysis to bear specifically on the narrative told by human and nonhuman material bodies acting together excavates narrative strategies that harness the multisensory

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<sup>80</sup> For Chambers, “These are the cultures in which drastic failures of justice, decency, tolerance, humaneness—of ‘culture’ itself in one of its senses, in which it is synonymous with civilization—are experienced, no so much as part of an everyday experience of misery (as AIDS is added to homophobia and racism or to the harshness of ghetto existence, in urban America; or as military and judicial violence, torture and rape are added, among Mendh’u’s people, to ordinary daily oppression and exploitation), but as something *unique*, without precedent and consequently unspeakable” (xvii)

<sup>81</sup> As Chambers puts it, “the occasions on which—with increasing frequency, it seems—‘culture’ lets us down are the occasions on which human culture reveals something crucial about itself: an essential fault-line running through it, or a ‘dark-side’ that is not accidental but rather constitutive, definitional. The violence that ‘culture’ holds at bay is actually something that culture itself is perfectly capable of producing, something that it does produce, *qua* culture, with frightening regularity” (xx)

affects of materiality, and thus work against the totalizing visual strategy of colonial representation.

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Often, Chambers argues, the approach to testifying is understood as a precise, vivid account that re-creates the witnessed experience, particularly in “cultures such as those of the West that have inherited a long tradition of understanding representation itself mimetically—as for example we do in legal definitions of testimony, in which the witness is expected to give an exact account of experience, or in the desire of many historians to recapture the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it really was)” (xvi). Thus, this is a tradition that relies on the visual, both of the initial witnessing and the subsequent testimony. Eyewitness accounts are considered to be the most authoritative, giving their testimony both a claim to authenticity and a right to speak.

Chambers proposes something different. He suggests that, “contrary to received opinion, testimonial writing is not so much a descriptive practice (whether historical or fictional) as it is a symbolic practice [...] it performs a captation, capturing its readers’ attention and redirecting it toward the obscene, that in culture which is otherwise culturally occulted: known but not acknowledged” (35-36). In other words, discourses of extremity such as testimonial writing function not by representing the event but by turning attention to something that is known in the present but unavowed. Narratives that operate effectively within discourses of extremity are those that, rather than representing the past, allow the past to haunt their narration. Examples discussed in previous chapters include Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, and the story that Sarah Doraghi tells about a pillowcase and her mother’s perfume. Both of these narrative disrupt the normality of the present temporal by pointing to a future that did not come to be.

Chambers thus argues that the narrative strategies that produce a vivid haunting rely not on a mimetic relationship to the past, but on a relationship based on 1) indexicality 2) asyndeton and 3) rephrasing. With indexicality, Chambers is alluding to Charles Peirce's definition of semiotics in which signs function by iconicity, indexicality, or symbolism.<sup>82</sup> Indexical signs do not mimetically represent but rather point to what they mean, as smoke points to fire or the growling of a stomach points to hunger, because of a material connection that exists between them. Asyndeton is a rhetorical device in which "a lack of grammatical or structural binding-gap—is counterbalanced and compensated for by a continuity of thought that seems stranger than the (elided, interrupted) grammar" (249). The uncanny smoothness of asyndeton, a sentence that is bound together by meaning but not by structure, turns attention to what is present but masked. I propose that asyndeton echoes the relationship between translation and diaspora proposed by Brent Hayes Edwards which I will turn to later in this chapter. Finally, rephrasing for Chambers evokes the tactical reutterance that discourses of extremity must perform: restating the past, which has likely been stated and restated many a time, in such a compelling way that it becomes new and open and unfinished<sup>83</sup>.

So, to recapitulate Chambers' argument, discourses of extremity are the narratives in an aftermath culture that call attention to past calamities that, if not outright denied, have been relegated to the periphery of societal concerns and identity, in part because they are thought to be closed, over, 'dealt with,' in a manner of speaking. It is difficult to make discourses of extremity

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Peirce formulated a non-Saussurean model for understanding the relations between signs and objects of signification, which he separates into three (sometimes overlapping) categories: resemblance called *iconicity* (a drawing of an apple evokes the contours and colors of an apple); actual connection, called *indexicality* (an apple tree produces apples); or rule, called *symbolism* (temptation, in Judeo-Christian traditions, is associated with a fruit, often an apple).

<sup>83</sup> This is not unlike Claudia Rankine's call in the previous chapter to keep the mourning of black lives an open dynamic, despite the seemingly endless accumulation of deaths of people of color.

heard because of the overpowering desire by the aftermath culture to treat those calamities as *aberrances* of human culture (in both its senses) rather than as *outcomes* of human culture. Discourses of extremity overcome that resistance through non-mimetic rhetorical strategies: indexicality, asyndeton, and rephrasing. These strategies succeed in making narratives heard because, rather than describing the past, they capture and turn attention to the places where the past simmers under the surface of the present, which Chambers calls a *détournement*.

This narrative *détournement*, or turning away from a plotted trajectory, enabled by extra-mimetic, materially-oriented aesthetic strategies, I will argue later, is not about discovering a hidden truth or seeing something in its true colors for the first time. Instead, it is about modifying the texture and affect—terms I will develop further on—of the spectator’s experience. Indeed, share Eve Sedgwick’s “intuition that a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions” (2003; 17). Her probing observation that “Even more immediately than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object,” (14) points to the rich possibilities for rethinking agency and subjectivity that exploring the properties of matter that call on a multi-sensorial investment on the part of the spectator/reader holds.

I suggest that narratives of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in Africa fall into the category of discourses of extremity, and face the same resistance that Chambers speaks about. However, rather looking at written narratives, I want to explore this particular discourse of extremity in the material form of exhibitions and memorial sites that commemorate this traumatic history. The aim is not to be comprehensive, but rather to see how some of these



aesthetic moves function through the material elements of two sites. The first site is *Exhibit B*, which is a travelling performance-installation created by Brett Bailey, a South African contemporary artist, which faithfully recreated scenes from slavery and European colonialism on the African continent using live actors and recreated props and stages. The second site is the Cape Coast Castle Slave Memorial and Museum in Ghana, one of the largest slave holding forts along the Gold Coast that was turned into a memorial site in the 1970s and named a UNESCO world heritage site. I want to tease out the visual, spatial, and material orientations of the narrative strategies that these sites employ. I will propose, like Chambers, that the power that such representations may have comes from the non-mimetic détournements in the aesthetics of the site. Unlike Chambers, I will add that the power is not merely one of holding and turning narrative attention, but of pushing affective positions into each other, pressing onto the suppleness of desire. In some ways, this joins Chambers' earlier work on oppositional narration and how it changes the desire of its other. However, I will look at the particular power of material objects to do this affective work, and, at how it happens in assemblage, modifying and being modified at the same time.

***Shards, Splinters, Scenes: Staging Slavery and Colonial History***

It was a glimmering pile of shards caught my eye, when I saw a photograph of the entrance of the Théâtre Gérard Philippe (TGP) in the city of Seine-Saint-Denis that borders Paris. Protestors that were attempting to stop the performance of a piece called *Exhibit B* had shattered the glass door to the theater's lobby, and the shards spilled onto the floor, a glittering mineral carpet that seemed to accuse as much as it warned of a splintered social bond.



Figure 10 Shattered Door at Théâtre Philippe Gérard, Saint-Denis, France. Photo by Hugo Haytham for *Le Monde*.

*Exhibit B*, a performance piece by white South African artist Brett Bailey, is a live installation that portrays 12 scenes, spanning 200 years, of the oppression of black peoples. From scenes of slavery to scenes of immigration deportation, the performance catalogues the myriad ways in which the color of black skin has sanctioned its abuse. The performance lasts about 20 minutes, with only a handful of spectators allowed into the exhibition space at the time. The actors do not speak, do not move; they are directed instead to lock eyes with the spectators as they pass by each tableau vivant. After the spectators exit the installation, a new group of viewers is brought in. The actors stay where they are, still immobile, still silent.

Bailey described his performance as coming out of the lineage of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century exhibitions of African men and women in Europe at World's Fairs, but, "Rather than portraying 'the native in his natural surrounds' as human zoos did, each installation shows the brutality subjected upon asylum seekers in the EU or inflicted upon colonial subjects. [...]"

Exhibit B is not primarily a work about colonial-era violence. Its main focus is current racist and xenophobic policies in the EU, and how these have evolved from the state-sanctioned racism of the late 19th century” (Bailey 2014, np). To Bailey and his supporters, the vivid representation past and present atrocities was a transparently anti-racist gesture. The performance spoke for itself, denouncing racism and enacting an anti-racist action through the enunciation of the brutality of racism. And yet, to several hundred protestors, many of them people of color and several of them artists, the visual recreation of racist acts does not, in itself, constitute an anti-racist action “sans ambiguïté,” as French Minister of Culture Fleur Pellerin, who defended Bailey, categorized it.

The glittering carpet of broken glass at the entrance of the TGP that caught my attention as I watched the events unfold, stood in stark visual dissonance to the slickly-shiny, smelly, dirt-compacted floor of the “Male Dungeons” at the Cape Coast Castle Slave Memorial site that I had visited in Ghana a few months prior. And yet, both were floors that betrayed the feet that walked on them. As I pored over photos of the protests, a torrent of images came in: the red stripes on the glass doors of the theater, the white posters with black ink slogans carried by the protestors, the policemen in uniform, the heavy coats and scarves to withstand the winter clime worn by the protestors, the translucent drops of milk spilling down a protestors face as she attempted to soothe the effect of the police forces’ tear gas. The images I collected from the *Exhibit B* coverage steadily invaded the archive of my photos from the Cape Coast Castle Slave memorial and its own door, The Door of No Return, memorable for other reasons. My archive of photographs from that site depicted peeling white walls, lines of black cannons looking over a turquoise ocean, dark damp dungeons, marble plaques inscribed with hopeful statements, the shimmering and speckled covers of the visitor comment books that I read over and scanned. As

these images began to occupy, side by side, my computer screen, it became clear to me that both of these spaces and objects were, through their own methods, telling a story of fracture even though their intent was to mend broken bonds.

In other words, this strange and disparate assemblage of objects created a force of their own. Though *Exhibit B* is a contemporary work of art and the Cape Coast Castle is a historic site turned into a memorial and museum, I was struck by the resonances between them, more similar than different in the end. Both sites emphasized their reliance on archives as a way to secure their claim of “authentically” representing a brutal past; both mediated the experience through motion, as the visitors were required to move in the built space; both included performative elements, as the visit to Cape Coast is a guided tour, with the guide acting as a storyteller as the visitors move between the different rooms in the fort; both elicit strong reactions, positive and negative; both claim that the experience they offer is designed to touch all people, but the interpretations of the experience appear to diverge sharply along racial lines; and perhaps most importantly, both sites’ mission is to raise awareness of the past in order to promote healing and empathy in the present.

While I contend that both sites do not quite live up to this—not simple—mission, it does appear that the Cape Coast Castle comes closer to the goal of setting in place structures for empathy. For me, these structures of empathy become possible because of the way the site deploys non-human material bodies rather than human bodies in their representation of the past, and because it taps into the non-visual material properties of human and non-human bodies. While it is to some degree inadvertent, the Cape Coast Castles narrative strategies are, in a way, gestures of translation rather than gestures of mimesis. I argue that multisensory translation as a mode of narration in exhibitions, instead of mimetic representation, allows for more effective engagement with visitors’ empathies. I suggest this is especially true when there is room made

for humans and objects to work in assemblage, as this opens affective pathways that are less easily accessible when the visual comes first.

**“Unambiguously Anti-racist” vs. “Reproduire ≠ Critiquer”**

In 2014, two Parisian cultural institutions, the Théâtre Gerard Philippe de Saint-Denis (TGP) and the Centre 104, programmed *Exhibit B* to perform at the end of the year. Both of these institutions are located outside of the city center, far from the historic opera and playhouses. They are, instead, found on the much more ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged north end of Paris. The performance was to take place first at the TGP, on November 27-30, and then at the Centre 104 in the 19th arrondissement from December 7-16. The performance had been previously shown in France, notably at the renowned theater festival in Avignon in the summer of 2013. It had been well-received at the festival, applauded as a brave work that the festival program described as forcing the public to confront the humanity of objectified peoples, and contending that, “Son installation nous enjoint à nous positionner face à la réalité historique d'une propagande colonialiste brutale et manipulatrice, mais aussi face au racisme latent qui perdure de nos jours” (Festival d'Avignon, n.p.). When it came to Paris a year later, however, the reaction was the polar opposite.<sup>84</sup>

Before the show opened in Paris, several community actors began organizing to protest the performance. These included the existing associations the Brigade anti-negrophobie (BAN) and the Conseil représentatif des associations noires de France (CRAN), as well as a collective of primarily artists of color who eventually became a loose association called Contre Exhibit B.

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<sup>84</sup> The location of the performance in Paris almost certainly influenced the public reception. In comparison to the Festival d'Avignon, a program whose primary audience is international theater aficionados who have the means to travel to and stay in a picturesque town in the South of France during the summer, Saint-Denis and the 19th arrondissement of Paris are socially and racially diverse areas that have few and modest cultural institutions. Many of the cultural institutions in the area cater to these residents, the Centquatre in particular is a mixed used space that has open areas that can be used for skateboarding, dancing, free tai-chi classes. Its programming includes contemporary concerts and dance parties as well as more challenging theater pieces.

This collective started a petition that eventually gathered over 20,000 signatures and brought a suit to court demanding that the performance be shut down. The protesters also included a stalwart member of the Front de Gauche organization, the British-born professor John Mullen who became one of the go-to spokespeople for the movement after publishing a widely read post on his blog. The collective and other community actors attempted to organize a public debate with the artist Brett Bailey and the director of the TGP, Jean Belleroni, before the performances began. According to some of the organizers, one meeting with Jean Belleroni, the director of Théâtre Philippe Gérard, and Didier Paillard, the mayor of Saint Denis, was eventually scheduled. The concerned members of the collective and other residents attended the meeting expecting it to function as a round table conversation. Instead, as described by one of the protestors, the director and the mayor lectured them about the importance of art and suggested that their concerns about the performance were all due to a misinterpretation of the piece: in short, that they didn't "get" art.<sup>85</sup>

With the performances set to open as scheduled, the collective decided to organize a protest in front of the theater on Exhibit B's opening night. This may also have been influenced by the protests in London just a few months earlier when the Barbican Center organized for *Exhibit B* to be installed at The Vaults, an off-site contemporary arts space. The performance in London was met with similar resistance: petitions to suspend the show, requests for discussion with the organizers that were denied, and protests on opening night that forced their way into the theater. The momentum from the London protest washed over to France. Like in London, police forces were present at the opening night, as were other human rights organizations that supported

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<sup>85</sup> I attended a public conversation with John Mullen and one of the other organizers of the collective against *Exhibit B*, organized a few months later as part of the *Semaine Anti-Coloniale* in February 2015. During this debate, the panelists spoke about the meeting and my description comes from their report. I have been unable to find any press, statements, or other transcriptions of what happened at that meeting.

*Exhibit B* in the name of freedom of speech and artistic expression. The Observatoire de la liberté d'expression, a committee formed by the Ligue des droits de l'homme (LDH), had delegates on site who attempted to mediate between the different groups and speak to the spectators as well as Belleroni and the different organizers. The agitated crowd eventually broken through the theatre's door, creating that magnificent carpet of glass shards and ending the performances for the night. The following weeks saw peaceful protests and the attempts at legal action. The Observatoire, in their lengthy report published in May 2015, said that at this point it attempted to organize a public debate, but that the Contre Exhibit B collective refused to participate. The judge ruled that the performance was not anti-racist and that the freedom of expression must be upheld. The show went on as scheduled at the theater, and though its run at the Centre 104 was shortened by two days, the performances scheduled for those days were simply added to other nights and to the night of December 12th, which was originally had no performances scheduled.

Though the collective was unsuccessful in ending the performances, they did draw in a lot of media attention. The mainstream's—and particularly the cultural mainstream voiced by magazines such as *Télérama* and *Le Monde*'s culture pages—analysis of the debate can best be summarized by Michel Guerrin's article :

Ce rejet n'est pas tant esthétique que communautaire. Marre de voir des Noirs réduits à leurs habits de victimes, et d'occulter leur révolte. Marre que le décideur (le metteur en scène) soit blanc et ceux qui exécutent (les acteurs) soient noirs. Marre que les Noirs soient sous-représentés dans la culture en France. Marre que le pouvoir blanc colonial ne soit pas figuré. *Le monde* 12.04.2014, np

The outcry based not on aesthetics, but on identity politics. Black people have been reduced to victimhood, their revolutionary efforts occluded, for long enough. Black people (the actors) have had to follow the directions of white decision makers (the artist) for long enough. Black people have been underrepresented in French culture for long enough. White colonial power has been left anonymous for too long.

In essence, the mainstream coverage tended to cast the protestors as engaging in a debate about identity politics and institutional disparity, but *not* about “art.” The journalists who were pro-*Exhibit B* appeared to latch on to only the parts of the protestors argument that focused on who gets to tell the story of slavery and colonization—the part of the argument that claimed that Brett Bailey, a white man that grew up with all the privileges of apartheid in South Africa, was not in his right to tell their story. Those who were pro-*Exhibit B* also focused on the protestors’ frustration at the fact that in cultural institutions in France—which are largely financed by the state—there are very few people of color in positions of power. Thus the few representations of black or of African peoples and cultures are for the most part selected or created by white decision makers. In other words, the media and institutional defenders of *Exhibit B* believed that the Contre Exhibit B collective and their allies were decrying the fact that people of color, particularly black people in France, are spoken *about* and spoken *for* but never given the opportunity to speak for themselves. And while some of them conceded to the point about structural racism, they did not seem to think that the protestors had anything meaningful to say about *Exhibit B* as a specific aesthetic proposition.

I find it curious that, Guerrin (cited above) and others explicitly cast the arguments as *not* being about aesthetics. And because it wasn’t about aesthetics, it became about freedom of speech. And yet, while disallowing the possibility that the protestors were making aesthetic interpretations, the performance’s supporters were also basing their arguments on an aesthetic judgment. To cite just one example, Didier Paillier, the mayor of Saint-Denis wrote an open letter responding to the petition the protestors sent to him to cancel the performance. In it, he says that he has not seen piece (and will not be able to see it—much like many of the protestors who were, on the contrary, criticized for making an interpretation before seeing it themselves).



He stresses that he must uphold freedom of speech, yet adds: “Je ne partage pas l’interprétation que vous faites de la proposition de Brett Bailey au TGP. [...] *Exhibit B* est une dénonciation claire de la domination, de l’esclavage, du racisme à travers les siècles de notre histoire, à l’encontre des personnes noire, y compris sous ses formes les plus actuelles” (Paillier 2014 n.p. [I do not agree with your interpretation of the work of Brett Bailey at the TGP. (...) *Exhibit B* is a clear denunciation over two centuries of domination, slavery, and racism against Black people in historical and present-day forms]). Paillier thus, on the one hand, suggests that the artists’ right to expression must be protected, and on the other hand suggests his decision to protect the performance comes from *his interpretation* of the artist’s message as anti-racist. Similarly, since Bailey, his actors, and others had always insisted that the intention of the piece was to denounce racism past and present as well as the lingering effects of colonialism, the judge that was ruling on the suit against the performance decided *Exhibit B* was not an act of hate speech and that shutting it down would be a violation of freedom of expression, particularly *artistic* expression, which is always susceptible to differing interpretation.

The casting of the protesters’ charges as ones of identitarian concerns rather than as aesthetic concerns created an impasse; each side unable to hold a debate since the terms of the debate were unavowed. I am interested in this silencing of the aesthetic valence of the debate (or rather, its silencing when the affective interpretation of the aesthetics on the part of the protesters differed from the interpretation of those in power and in proximity to the arts). Contrary to the prevailing media interpretations, I contend that there was, in fact, a discussion of the value and the effectiveness of the aesthetic dimension of *Exhibit B* carried out by the protestors. The lengthiest discussion from this point of view comes from the article that Christine Eyene, a research fellow in contemporary art at the University of Central Lancashire and a black French

woman, published on her blog Eyonart. In this denouncement of *Exhibit B*, Eyene brings to light several concerns of the aesthetic order, including, among other critiques, the voyeuristic aspect of the spatial organization of the performance; its emphasis of seeing rather the speaking; its lack of performative, visual, or material innovation. Since Eyene's subject of research is aesthetics, contemporary art, and the representation of black bodies, one could say that it is not surprising that she takes on the aesthetic dimension of the debate. However, a more careful and open reading of the protestors complaints reveals that aesthetic engagement was a central part of the protest movement, even among the ranks of non-specialists.

Most notably, one of the picket signs carried by the protestors read "Réproduire ≠ Critiquer."



Figure 11 Protest sign "Reproduire ≠ Critiquer". Photo by Hugo Haytham for *Le Monde*.

Defenders of *Exhibit B* often lauded Bailey's careful investigation of archival material to visually re-create the scenes in his tableaux. The protestors, on the other hand, had strongly divergent interpretation of this aesthetic approach of realism. What they contended through their simple

slogan was that replicating the *visual conditions* of a situation of oppression does not necessarily critique, undo, or otherwise shed light on that oppression—and that it can, in fact, through its aesthetic choices and its context of production, reiterate oppressive power relations. One news source, *Libération*, did catch on to the aesthetic concerns of the protestors, as an opinion piece co-written by several of its journalists stated: “Les protestataires font de la politique, *et mènent un débat esthétique*. Ils et elles posent le problème de la représentation de leur oppression, de celle de leurs ancêtres, de la place des «Blancs» dans l’installation, celle des spectateurs et de la programmation du théâtre subventionné” (12.11.2014, np, italics mine [These are political protests that debate aesthetics as well. The protester formulate the problem of representing their oppression, their ancestors oppression, the role of white people in the installation, the role of the viewers and of the theater’s programming which receives subsidies]). In essence, this article noted that the issue that the protestors had with the performance was not merely that the oppression of black peoples was being represented by someone who benefitted from that oppression, but the *aesthetic choices* that guided the representation. That, for example, if Bailey was faithfully recreating scenes as they would have happened, why were only the (black) victims and not the (white) perpetrators pictured? Or why were the black actors only depicted as victims? Why were the victims allowed to “accuse” only with the gaze and not with words? It was not merely the *conditions of production* (i.e. a white man telling the story of black people’s exploitation) that the collective took issue with but the *aesthetic vision of the production*.

The phrase “unambiguously anti-racist” was echoed amongst the official statements released in defense of *Exhibit B*. What the protestors were suggesting, which few of the supporters seemed to understand, was that a representation could be anti-racist in its intent, but nevertheless employ aesthetics strategies that—along with the institutional biases affecting its

production—could perpetuate rather than critique existing racial dynamics. This brings me to the ideas I want to work out in this chapter. I argue that the protesters were critiquing the aesthetic choice to employ *visually-oriented strategies of representation*; they contended that aesthetics that rely on the visual is an ineffective narrative strategy to memorialize, mourn, or educate a public about past systems of racial oppression and their ongoing consequences. I suggest that when we look at how Cape Coast Castle represents this same history of racial systems of oppression, we find an aesthetic strategy that is materially-oriented rather than visually-oriented. While the memorial site's intentions resemble *Exhibit B's*, its aesthetic tactics deploy a different logic to enact their critical work. The aesthetic strategy at Cape Coast, based on projection, proximity, and indexical relations, introduces other potential problems. However, the associations that it renders possible are powerful, unruly, sometimes ugly assemblages that nevertheless may provide ways out of *Exhibit B's* impasse. In the end, I will argue that the materially-oriented aesthetic strategy that emerges at the Cape Coast Memorial site functions much like translation does in the way it sets a relationship between the original and the translated object that opens affective pathways and modes of thinking about the past that are better suited for the critical work of remembering and undoing past systems of oppression and their ongoing consequences.

***“Je ne peux pas dire que je ne sais pas, que je n’ai pas vu***

To a certain degree, I would argue that the most important thing that the protestors revealed was that though it may have intended to denounce racism, *Exhibit B* was itself a product of the structural and institutional racism that favors white people as producers of high culture and black people as the bodies through which cultural labor is performed. However, the protestors' denouncement of the visually-oriented narrative strategy employed by *Exhibit B* merits exploration. I say that Exhibit B employed a visually-oriented narrative for several reasons: it

reduced human and non-human material bodies to their visual properties, it employed these bodies as signs that functioned via resemblance and symbolism, and it sought, via these moves, to make the power dynamics of the colonial gaze explicit. In Bailey's own words, the power of *Exhibit B* comes from making visible a visual relationship: "It is about looking and being looked at. Both performer and spectator are contained within the frame" (Bailey 2014, np). To make the gaze take center stage, he removes all other elements: plot, dialogue, and bodily movement are notably absent. Bailey wants the spectator to see, and to become self-conscious of the fact that they are seeing. Seeing the objectification of humans through systematic oppression is, for Bailey, the solution for present-day racism. Alexandre Fandard, a biracial actor who worked with Bailey twice on *Exhibit B*, called the experience eye-opening, saying that by working on the production he became aware of his own ignorance of the colonial past and its relationship to the present-day racism he experiences in France. Fandard suggests that this is the experience of the visitors as well: "Le spectateur en sortant se dit : 'Je ne peux pas dire que je ne sais pas, que je n'ai pas vu' " (Reith, n.p. [The viewer, upon exiting, tells themselves: 'I cannot say that I didn't know, that I hadn't seen]). The public sees examples of historic and present-day systemic racism, and acknowledges what they have seen, and this, for Bailey and his supporters, becomes a transformative knowledge.

To see, and to see yourself seeing, then, was *Exhibit B*'s aesthetic strategy for deconstructing the racist legacy of colonialism. This was a visually-oriented strategy not only in its intended effect (making the gaze visible) but in how it reduced all human and non-human bodies to their visual properties. Part of this was the intent to make visible the dehumanization of people through their *objectification*: their rendering into inanimate, passive objects, devoid of will and agency. Fandard speaks of how the utter stillness of the human actors invited a confusion on the state of their personhood: "Certains visiteurs, lorsqu'ils découvrent les tableaux

ne se rendent pas tout de suite compte que ce sont des vraies personnes qui les composent. Et lorsqu'ils le découvrent, ça fait un choc” (Reith, n.p.). When spectators realize the human body on the stage is not an inanimate mannequin but a live, “real” human, they “see” objectification; the confusion becomes an accusation, as the viewer realizes they have committed the crime of seeing an object in the place of a person.<sup>86</sup>

In essence, Bailey is creating visual analogies—an aesthetic strategy related to mimesis that relies on drawing perfect parallels, tight equivalences. In another scene—the one which Fandard plays—a black person in contemporary clothing, feet bound and mouth taped shut, sits with arms tied to the armrests of an airplane seat that is placed on shipping pallets.



Figure 12 "Immigration" tableau in *Exhibit B*. 2013 Avignon Theater Festival. Photo by AFP/Franck Pennant.

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<sup>86</sup> I will push back on these categories of human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, later in this chapter, but for now I will let them stand as they are how Fandard, Bailey, and many others processed what was happening in *Exhibit B*.

A series of numbers are pasted to his chest as a sort of name-tag. The actor represents an asylum seeker. Bailey, in nearly all of his descriptions of *Exhibit B* speaks of how the work is supposed to criticize EU policies that dehumanize and take away the rights of refugees. In this scene, the human body is likened to an object that can be packed up and shipped away at the whims of international accords, without the “object” having any say in the matter.

The visual properties of the human bodies and the costumes, props, and stage elements also functioned via resemblance and symbolism. This is best explained through an analysis of one of the tableaux, called “Lodgement d’un Officier, Brazzaville 1903.”



Figure 13 "Le Logement d'un officier" in *Exhibit B*. 2013 Avignon Theater Festival. Photo by Christina Reynaud de Lage. This tableau is a historical recreation, built to perfectly resemble what an officer’s room in the Belgian Congo would have looked like. The wallpapered room is decorated with hunting trophies, black-and-white photographs (including one of bare-chested black men kneeling in formation with uniformed white officers flanking them on each side), and a single bed. On this

bed, a black woman sits, undressed from the waist up and with her back towards the audience that approaches the tableau.



Figure 14 Close-up of "le Logement d'un officier" in *Exhibit B*. Barbican Center London. Photo by DR.

A cast-iron collar and chain drapes her neck. The resemblance—historically researched, meticulously reproduced from photographic archives—between the visual properties of the material bodies of the objects and the actor and the room as it would have existed in 1903 in Brazzaville is emphasized. The visitor sees the same thing that an officer a hundred years earlier would have seen upon returning to his chambers in the evening. In other words, the spectator becomes an *eyewitness* to the sexual exploitation that was current in the colonies.

In fact, just by entering the performance, there is an aesthetic gesture that places the spectator in the position of the white perpetrator. As mentioned, Bailey lists “the visitors” as one of the material elements of his installation’s composition, the way labels will list what an art piece is made of (e.g. “oil on canvas”). The *Observatoire de la liberté de la création*, which published an extensive report analyzing and responding to the criticism *Exhibit B* received, praised this move and concurred with Bailey’s explanation that making the viewer aware that



they are looking and being looked at is one of the ways in which the piece deconstructs racism. They write, referencing the performance when it took place in Avignon: “Cette place [de spectateur] est assignée d’entrée : une jeune femme de couleur impose le silence complet avant d’appeler dans un ordre aléatoire, à intervalles réguliers, le numéro de chacun; et, dans ce jeu disciplinaire, le public d’Avignon se découvre blanc” (2015, 15 [This role [of being The Viewer] is assigned at the entrance. A young woman of colors demands utter silence before calling in random order and at regular intervals, the number of each visitor. In this disciplinary game, the public in Avignon is faced with their whiteness]). The spectator is thus not merely witnessing scenes mimetically resembling those of the past, ‘as they really were’, but the act of witnessing is revealed as violent. The spectator occupies the subject position of witness—and thus of perpetrator.

I point out how these function via resemblance and symbolism because I will later speak about Pierce’s other semantic rule, indexicality, and I will suggest that as a rhetorical strategy of representation, it is a more open-ended and productive mode. However, what I want to point out here is how *Exhibit B*’s aesthetic strategies work primarily by tapping into the visual properties of human and nonhuman bodies to create analogous relationships. It furthermore reinforces the hierarchy of the visual by suggesting that it is through exposure—both of the violent content and of the violent gaze—that art can provoke a particular affective reaction that deconstructs the systems of oppression based on race that are the legacy of European colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Bailey’s reasoning is that the problem that needs addressing is ignorance—people do not know how past and present systems of oppression are intertwined, and if they *see it as it really was*, they will know and this knowledge will be transformative. The problem that I identify in his line of reasoning is not just that “seeing” such a thing “as it really was” is impossible, but that

visuality itself has a long history of being employed as a colonizing tool. As Renée Green, a contemporary African-American artist whose oeuvre interrogates the historical representations of black people, states, “The act of looking can be deceptive, and that relates to notions of seeing and knowing: what you see is not equivalent truth, because perception is something that’s learned and constructed” (Harkvay, 2). This is in stark opposition to Fandard’s claim that *Je ne peux pas dire que je ne sais pas, que je n’ai pas vu*. For Fandard, and, it would seem, Bailey and many of his supporters, the act of looking reveals a “truth,” rather than being itself a product of a pre-existing system of power.

Green’s artistic work is influenced by Edward Saïd’s groundbreaking scholarship that demonstrated how Western European and American knowledge about the Orient was built out of visual and discursive descriptions of its geography, people, social systems, etc, all made by Western individuals and institutions—and guided by Western economic and political interests. In other words, understanding of the Orient was constructed externally, through the gaze of an outsider. Furthermore, this discourse of the Oriented, regardless of how “factual” it claimed to be in its contents, methods, or analysis, was an exercise of power: “dealing with [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorizing views on it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). In V.Y. Mundimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*, Mundimbe works specifically on the case of the African continent and the knowledge produced about it, where, like for Saïd’s *Orientalism*, knowledge is one of the ways in which power is constructed, not undone. This argument, and its visual element, is taken up and developed to speak of colonial interest and travel writing more generally in Mary Louis Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing*

*and Transculturation* in which once again the act of looking at an “Other” becomes a mean of conquering, settling, and ruling.

There is, furthermore, a history specific to black skin that enabled its exploitation via measures of hypervisibility, the most canonical example of it being Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he recounts the pivotal moment when a young white boy on the metro in Paris notices him and says to his mother, “Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur” (84; [‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’] Markmann 112). This moment, that crystallizes for Fanon the fact that it is through *being seen* that his subjectivity is constituted, “par l’autre, le Blanc, qui m’avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récits,” (90; [by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories] Markmann 111) embodies the specifically visual axis that constitutes what Fanon will call the racial corporeal schema.

Here Claudia Rankine’s voice from the previous chapter chimes in and echoes, noting how the most intimate a painful moment of life—death—is for a black person today is rarely a private one, but rather one that is commonplace in every place: fiction and factoids, courtrooms and courtroom TV dramas. She insists: “Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against” (n.p.). Her words strike an uncanny rhythm with James Baldwin’s words, several decades earlier, given at a lecture in London: “I don’t know how you discover what it means to be black in London, but I know what it means, how you discover that it in New York [...] I know how you *watch*, as you grow older, literally—now this is not a figure of speech—the corpses of your brothers and your sisters pile up around you. And not for anything they have done” (transcript; emphasis mine). What all three of these (among other)

critics point to is that black bodies, particularly those suffering from physical or moral harm, are already exposed—overexposed even—and become the image with and against which living people of color are positioned.<sup>87</sup>

Fandard's claim, then, that the spectators exiting *Exhibit B* can no longer say they that they don't know, that they haven't *seen*, misses the mark. The spectators have already seen, their whole long lives, the objectification and exploitation of black bodies. When Bailey's *Exhibit B* is examined in this context, one begins to wonder what, if anything, distinguishes the imaginary of colonial exploitation and slavery produced through his sets and actors from the pre-existing imaginary that operates conscious-and-unconsciously outside of the installation. One wonders if Bailey's insistence on *sameness*, his attempt to critique by creating an exact equivalence may actually be what betrays his critique, working against his artistic intention. It is shortsighted to think that mere sight, the gesturing of revealing, necessarily enacts affective change. Seeing, knowing, knowing-through-seeing, operate through the same logic that made it possible to exploit and objectify other humans. In other words, Bailey is perhaps not wrong in saying that ignorance of the history of exploitation and its particular visual language is one of the factors that enables continued structural exploitation of people of color. Nevertheless, "seeing" that imagery—representing it through aesthetic strategies of mimesis—may do more to reproduce the power dynamics of the gaze than increase understanding of its damage, much less undo its damage. Furthermore, the affective positions it opens—calibrated horror, shock, pity, guilt—do not do enough, it seems, to tug and splinter profoundly new desires into being—the kind of desire that says seeing-knowing is not enough.

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<sup>87</sup> See also Gilman (1985), Mitchell (2010), Singer (2010), Strother (1999), Wright (2000) for discussions of black—and particularly black women's—bodies as hypervisible objects and the construction of race, gender, and sexuality.

### *Discourses of Extremity and Translation*

Let us return to the beginning, to the rhetorical tactics that Ross Chambers identified as crucial to a discourse of extremity. These were a deployment of the indexical nature of signs, an insistence on asyndeton, and an uncanny rephrasing that makes what is already known new again. What I want to trace in this section is how Brent Hayes Edwards' theory of diaspora as translation maps onto the rhetorical tactics outlined by Chambers. I do so not only because of the resonances that immediately appeared when I read the two theories together, but because the question that Edward attempts to answer via this reworking of diaspora as translation is the same question that the two case studies in this chapter—*Exhibit B* and the Cape Coast Slave Memorial—attempt to answer. That question is, how do we create a sense of belonging across geographic, temporal, and racial differences, given a long history of exploitation *along those lines of difference* that continues in the present? And how can this sense of belonging be turned into something that undoes that exploitation, rather than merely mask it in the name of reconciliation?

For my work, of course, part of the answer lies in changing the way we understand material objects as holders of the past. In fact, I will argue that if we speak of material objects as translators, rather than witnesses, of the past, we can encourage affective structure that facilitate that nuanced sense of belonging. Before we get to that, however, let's look at the relationship between translation, diaspora, and the rhetorics of discourses of extremity. What matters about the rhetorics that Chambers identifies is their effects: how it opens up what aesthetics can *do*. First, with indexicality, it creates a connection that is not based on visual resemblance but rather a material connection, and this material connection may be one that can traverse temporal and geographic difference. When an object is used to represent—that is, to call into the present—a past event, then, rather than visually standing in for events as they really were, they can be used

as indexes to point to connections between past and present. With asyndeton, a narrative can allow for a sensation of both continuity and rupture: grammatical rules are broken but the flow of the sentence's thought continues. With rephrasing, resistance to reception can be broken by a changing of the stage. These are, in other words, affective outcomes. They encourage a particular affective response by the reader and open a space in which the reader can position herself in relation to the narrative that is being told.

When I examine Edward's argument that diaspora can be understood as a practice of translation, it turns out that practice also implies a set of rhetorical strategies—ones that echo, interestingly, the rhetorical gestures that Chambers elucidates. Edwards speaks of translation as a form of detour rather than a *retour* (return) to an original provenance. Translation is a future-oriented movement, whose imagined audience is future readers in another place. It also has a serial nature to it—translations are often re-translated, contested, or may inspire further translations in other languages. Edwards links this outward moving gesture to the Glissantian notion of *detour*: “The discontinuities and disjunctures in any translation . . . might be best described not a predetermined failure but as the rich complexity of a modern cultural practice characterized above all by what Édouard Glissant calls ‘detour’ ” (22). This distancing and disjuncture from a previous starting point, I argue, resembles the rhetorical effects of indexicality. It is the material connection between the original and the translation (a translator worked on a text to produce another text) that constitutes their relationship, rather a visual, aural, or even semantic resemblance. Translation puts indexical relationships in place; it supports or creates affinities, in other words, between distinct bodies.

Another notable aspect of translation that Edwards highlights is the *décalage* that constitutes articulation. He calls translation a “process of linking or connection across gaps—a

practice we might term *articulation*” (11). He furthermore notes that anatomically speaking, “Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is *only* difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows movement” (15).

Extrapolating the articulation of bones and ligaments to the articulation of words, Edward proposes that while translation makes links across conceptual gaps, it also removes (*décaler*) other rhetorical prosthetics that were propping up or bridging conceptual gaps in the original enunciation of the text. This echoes Chambers’ description of the rhetorical effects of asyndeton, wherein a disjuncture is bridged but the jutting, odd rhythm of sentence’s suture is nevertheless palpable.

The final point of Edwards that I will touch on is translation as a gesture that reworks the *frame*. Drawing on David Scott, Edwards emphasizes that framing is a gesture that *places* a text in relation to the conditions of its enunciation and the forces that govern its discursivity (paraphrasing from Scott 1999, 83). In other words, there is attention drawn to the stage and setting of the text—and this stage and setting are reworked, reframed. This matters because the shifting of the frame allows the center or content to be reworked as well. It alters the gaze in such a way that new thoughts may become possible. As Edwards puts it, when he studied the exchanges between black intellectuals in the United States and France in the period between the two World Wars, it became evident that “certain moves, certain arguments and epiphanies, can only be staged beyond the confines of the United States, and sometimes in languages other than English” (4-5). This reworking of the frame to reword the content resonates with the rhetorical effects of rephrasing discourses of extremity as described by Chambers. Rephrasing involves a re-direction of attention to the conditions that make it difficult for the speaker to speak (a traumatic event, somehow survived, and both the speaker’s survival and the trauma of the event

seem unjustifiable beyond description), and for the speaker to be heard (the discomfort of witnessing, even if by proxy, a traumatic event).

If the rhetorical gestures of translation and their effects resemble those of discourses of extremity, I wonder what might happen if, in representing those collective traumatic events of the past, we adopted a multisensorial aesthetics of translation, rather than an aesthetics of mimesis? This is the question that I pose at the Cape Coast Slave Memorial site. For even if many of the elements seem to be represented in a fairly conventional manner of trying to vividly recreate the human exploitation that took place in that site, there are moments when the material objects and physical space appear to *détourner* the narrative. The relationship they invite with the past is not one of re-creation but of projection, and I am calling this a materially-oriented memory work.

### ***Cape Coast: Materially-Oriented Memory Work***

The Cape Coast Memorial, like *Exhibit B*, attempts to do two things. It strives to tell the story of the transatlantic slave trade, a discourse of extremity whose extent of human suffering and depth of human-to-human exploitation is difficult to communicate. And it believes that telling this story is necessary to ensure a more just world, free from systematic exploitation along racial lines. *How* they tell this story—what kinds of aesthetic strategies the sites employ and how these strategies create associations, relations, and practices of relating past to present—differs starkly. Whereas *Exhibit B* is a visually-oriented experience, the Cape Coast Castle taps into the extra-visual material qualities of the spaces, the setting, and the objects it deploys in its storytelling. In other words, it asks the visitors to turn their attention not to what they see, but what they are smelling, standing on, touching, hearing. Rather than asking them primarily to *look*, it asks them move through certain physical spaces, to enact gestures, to call on those non-visual



senses and, ultimately, to use this assemblage of physical actions and sensation to call the past into the present through a deep imaginative engagement.

The site at Cape Coast, I should explain, was initially a commercial fort built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Swedish Africa Company to support their trading activities along the coast, notably the gold trade.



Figure 15 Cape Coast Castle and Memorial Site. Photo courtesy of author.

It changed hands various times, ending up as a British possession in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was increasingly used as a holding center in the transatlantic slave trade. The British reconstructed and expanded it in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in part to expand the cells where captives could be held. Though it came under the care of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board in 1957, at Ghana's independence, and was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979, it wasn't until the early 1990s that the site was heavily restored and a museum exhibition was added in one section of the castle to talk about the history of the region and the slave trade. The museum exhibition is set in one wing of the fort, but the majority of the castle has been restored to what it

looked like in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, without museum panels or explanations, the idea being that the visitors will experience it in a state that similar to what it would have been like during the transatlantic slave trade.



Figure 16 Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The entrance fee to the memorial includes a guided tour of this section of the castle, and while some visitors may wander off before or during the tour, most of the visitors do participate in the guided visit—in fact, the memorial site staff is fairly insistent at herding wayward visitors that have wandered off into joining a guided tour. This “memorialized” area of the castle and the guided tour is the portion of the space that I will be analyzing, based on several on-site observation days I did during the period of May 1-4, 2014 and a follow-up observation day on August 6, 2017. While much ink could be spilled on the museum portion of the visit, it is the physical space of the castle and the way that this space is animated by the tour guides and visitors that is the most pertinent to this dissertation’s study of people and material objects telling stories together.

How then, does the assemblage of people and objects tell the story of the transatlantic slave trade in this site? I said earlier that the site calls on the non-visual material qualities of the objects at the memorial site; what I mean by this is that the organization of the site and the tour calls attention to the castle's materiality and the how this matter occupies *space*. The castle and material objects in the site are not presented for visual assimilation, but as vibrant bodies that exist outside-but-not-quite of the visitor's own bodies. In other words, their materiality is emphasized. Susan Pearce, in defining what objects do in museum collections, expresses it like so: "The materiality of objects means that they occupy their own space, and this is how we experience them. Whether we bark our shins against them or put them in our pockets, we understand that where one of them is, nothing else can be" (Pearce 1992, 16). This materiality, I noticed, was constantly called upon to shape the visitors' experience at the memorial site.

The guided visit beings in underground dungeon, which is quite dark, lit only by a small stream of sunlight from small cutout windows on the top of the high walls.



Figure 17 Male Dungeon Entrance. Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The guides, in all the tours that I followed, repeatedly draw the visitors' attention to the floor in this space, which at first glance looks like matted dirt, a glossy brown. They point in particular to a section of the dungeon where a brick floor is visible, and point out how the brick part is a few centimeters lower than the brown dirt floor on which we are standing.



Figure 18 Excavated section of floor in Male Dungeons. Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The guides proceed to explain that the brick is the original floor, which was excavated by a team of researchers. They explain that we the visitors are standing on the residue of the hundreds of bodies that were kept in the small space, the residue of men that were trapped there, often so tightly packed there was barely room to sit, for months at a time. These men had to perform all the normal human bodily function in that room. They ate there, defecated, got sick and vomited, bled, cried, the guides say, adding that perhaps even bodies were left to decompose there... all of these bodily and organic excrements collected on the floor, got trampled and packed down to become the layer that we are standing on today. The guides point to the small size windows, and their placement high along the ceiling of the underground dungeon. This configuration stifles

both the light and the air circulation. The dungeon has retained hints of a foul smell —some visitors will be covering their noses and mouths during this presentation. The guides tell us that what we smell is that human residue of the men held captive in this space.

These claims, specious<sup>88</sup> and barbaric, that we are sensing the decomposition of human matter, cause an effect. It is this effect, elicited through the *narrative and aesthetic deployment* of the material presence of the castle, which is the object of this dissertation's analysis, not the historical accuracy of those claims. The history, and the local and global factors that animated the development of slave trade heritage site and the tourism around them along the Ghanaian coast, is a worthy subject that has been studied, notably by Christine Kreamer (1999), a Smithsonian curator who was deeply involved in the UNESCO-funding renovations to the memorial site that created the museum wing of the castle. However, what I am pursuing is the intersection between aesthetics and materiality that enable a narrative projection into discourses of extremity. The concept of *postmemory* as theorized by Marianne Hirsh can be useful in this. Postmemory is a belated, often collective, remembering that links people to the traumatic events lived by previous generations. Of particular importance are the creative processes of postmemory, in its cross-pollination with imaginative impulses: "Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation" (Hirsh 8). At the Cape Coast Castle memorial site, I will argue, the material elements of the slavery narrative set off these processes

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<sup>88</sup> After the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the site continued to be used as a trading point, and later became a British army training facility. There is understandably skepticism about the material and historical accuracy of claiming that the biological matter in the cells can be primarily attributed to human residue of the men held captive there. However, what interests me is the tour guides insistence on reading the space in this way, regardless of the exact composition and origin of the biological traces in the room.

of projection, investment and creation. The results are mixed—stunning, troubling, banal—but may open more capacious ways of connecting to that troubling history than Bailey’s *Exhibit B*.

Standing in that empty but evocative room at Cape Coast Castle, I think of the room in *Kétala* where Mémoire’s objects assembled to expose the material traces she had left in and on them, and used this residue of contact to trace out the mutual constitution of their lives. In the dungeons at Cape Coast, it is the human tour guides that do the work of giving voice to, narrating, tracing a story, but the gesture is similar: a calling attention to the material traces, to the residue of what-was-once-visible, and building the narrative out of this residue. The relationship this gesture sets in place between past and present, going back to what Charles Peirce and Chambers note, is an indexical rather than a mimetic one. It is a gesture that *points* to its subject rather than re-presenting it mimetically. One could liken this to the rhetorical figure of synecdoche, in which a part stands in for the whole or, more precisely in this case, the effect signals a cause. What the visitor sees is thus not exactly the thing to be seen, but it is intimately related to it. It is its *residue*.

Moreover, it is not through the act of seeing (and seeing oneself see) that the past becomes vivid, palpable, present. Instead, it is through *proximity* and *projection*. The visitors are not asked to *see* the men held captive in the dungeon, but rather to *apprehend* the experience of being held captive in the dungeon through smell, through the physical discomfort of being in a dark, dank room, and through recognizing their physical proximity to even the barest traces of what may be residue of the human bodies that once sweated and suffered in that space. Here again I sense an echo with Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter, in which human action and its effects is best understood as the product not of a single human being or beings, but the product of “an animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power”

(22). What makes it possible to *hear*—to not turn away from nor minimize—the extent of the human exploitation and suffering that happened in this place is turning attention to the material residue in the room, and inviting it act upon the living human bodies in the room. This narrative strategy recalls the story told by Mémoria’s dress in the previous chapter, whose fibers soak up and commemorate the sweat of Mémoria’s excitement. Any sensory reaction that the Cape Coast Castle’s presentation provokes is, of course, microscopic and temporary in relation to what would have been lived by people who were held captive there. Nevertheless, what is interesting is that the burden of being an eyewitness falls not on the visitor but on the material objects and space of the memorial site. It is the materiality of that space that witnessed the exploitation and suffering and now tells the story through its effect on the visitors.

The role of the visitor thus becomes not of being witness à la Brett Bailey, of seeing-and-knowing, but of *being in proximity*: holding a space for the material traces to do their affective work. This proximity is accompanied by a *projection*—an imaginative and sensorial investment—that likewise calls the past into the present. By provoking those sensations of discomfort and captivity through the material residue that persists in that space, the presentation by the guides attempts to transpose the past experience of the slaves onto the present bodies of the visitors. This echoes the mourning practices discussed in the previous chapter, in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, whose protagonist does not rely on the image of her mother to remember her, but rather finds way to modify and inscribe her flesh with imagined memories.

The sensory projection in Cape Coast is accompanied by a sequencing of physical gestures that likewise serve to call into the present the past experiences of the people held captive in the space. The visitors are guided through the fort in the supposedly the same sequence that

the men and women held captive would have experienced it, with a plaque mapping out the proper way to move through the castle.



Figure 19 Directional map at Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The tour begins at the male dungeon, which the visitors are told was the principal holding space, and continues through the corridor to the room where the captive men would have been weighed and measured in preparation for shipment across the ocean, and then the tour continues through another corridor to the door which would have led the men to the slave ship. The visitors step through the door and find themselves of the ocean shore that meets the castle's edge.

This door, which marks the final point of the tour, is called the Door of No Return.





Figure 20 Door of No Return. Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The name was given to the door because once the captives exited that door and boarded the slave ships, they would presumably never again set foot on the African continent.<sup>89</sup> However, the visitors are not asked only to re-perform this physical gesture of stepping out, but to *intervene in and change the narrative*. Once all the visitors are out of the castle, the guides tell them they must now complete the gesture that the captive men and women were obliged to leave unfinished: the visitors must return through the door.

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<sup>89</sup> The historical accuracy of the “Door of no Return”—whether is it *actually* the exit that the men and women would have been led to towards the ship—at the Cape Coast Castle is contested. What is notable is its symbolic power, and how it has become an essential trope in the telling of this story. Nearly all of the forts that serve as memorial sites along the Ghanaian Coast and up the West coast of Africa have a door designated as a “Door of no Return.” In fact, and the Ghana National Museum in Accra, the section on the history of the transatlantic slavery includes a “replica” door: at the end of the section, the visitor walks through a tiny corridor labeled “Door of No Return” with a curtain draped over the entrance.



Figure 21 Visitors walking through Door of No Return. Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

The guides explain that this action will demonstrate that the door has now become a door of return; that the descendants of slaves throughout the world are now welcome and free to come back.

Again, the past is called into the present not through mimesis but through another rhetorical relationship: asyndeton. This, as Chambers explains it, is a tactic that creates a continuity of thought despite a grammatical disjuncture. In the case of the Cape Coast Castle, the continuity that is created by this physical gesture is a narrative one: the descendants of slaves and the visitors standing in for them “return,” bringing the story to a (happy?) end. The narrative of

continuity belies a temporal rupture—that 200-year gap between the departure and “return,” but it also belies other ruptures which will become clear later on. For now, what is important to point out is how the memorial’s employment of the material space of the castle and their moving of the visitors through the space makes a narrative intervention that strives to close this temporal gap.

The memorial not only invites the visitors to intervene in and change the narrative—to be, in other words, narrative agents in assemblage with the materiality of the castle—but also to project themselves into the place of the men and women that were to be sold as slaves in the past, and to their descendents in the present. The memorial site presents this memory work as essential and self-evident, and as the solution to “understanding” the future and thus preventing similar exploitations. This is clearly stated in a memorial plaque installed in 2010 during then-President Barack Obama.



Figure 22 Memorial Plaque. Cape Coast Castle. Photo courtesy of author.

It reads as follows:

In Everlasting Memory

Of the anguish of our ancestors. May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again perpetuate such injustice against humanity. We, the living, vow to uphold this

This rhetoric suggests that the work of remembering can do justice (rest in peace) to the past, bring reconciliation (find their roots) in the present, and change (never again perpetuate such injustice) the future. The “We, the living” is meant to be all-encompassing, effacing geographic, racial, linguistic and economic differences among the visitors and joining them in the shared undertaking of preventing future injustice. This is one of the attempts at smoothing and closing the narrative that, while well-intentioned, I find problematic, as, it turns out do some of the visitors. However, before I turn to how the visitors use the material space of the memorial site to rupture the smoothing of the narrative, a few more observations must be made about the “we” that the memorial site seeks to bring together.

First, if *Exhibit B* implicitly puts the visitor in place of the perpetrator—the subject who does violence if only by looking—the narrative at the Cape Coast Castle memorial site invites the visitors to invest—perhaps even identify—with the subject position of the victim. Such an invitation carries its own set of risks and limitations which I will address later. For now, I will note that the investment comes through, as mentioned, the moving through the space of the castle, the multi-sensory investment in its material qualities, and the symbolic physical gestures such as the stepping through the Door of No Return. However, unlike *Exhibit B*, the perpetrators of this violent history are at times brought into focus. This is enacted by a calling upon the material space of the site to work as a narrative agent.

Throughout the tour, the guides will emphasize what I call the spatial hypocrisy of the built environment. While in the first dungeon, the guides will point to the ceiling of this room and ask the visitors to deduce what part of the fort they are standing under. The guide reveals that there was a church built directly above the dungeons, so, to paraphrase the words of several

guides, while the congregation sang songs of praise and asked for mercy from the heavens, they did not show mercy to the prisoners directly below them. Similarly, the guides will point out how the Governor's residence, located in the tower of the fort, is spacious, with tall windows that have breathtaking views over the ocean and invite the salty sea breeze. They remind the visitors of dank darkness of the dungeon rooms, with miniscule windows placed high on the ceiling to minimize light and heighten security. The sensory experience of standing in airy officers quarters reinforces the disparity between the captive men and women's experience and that of the officers.

In addition to analyzing how the material environment participates in the narrative strategy of Cape Cost Castle, I wanted to examine material traces of the visitors experience. What kinds of projections, investments, and creative interventions into the narrative, if any, were visitors making through the material supports offered by the memorial? At the Cape Coast Castle, there are visitor books dating back to 1970 in which visitors could write their name, address, and a little note.<sup>90</sup> The first ones have little, if any, commentary; an "Interesting history" or "Tragic story" seems to be the most common notes, contained on a single line of a column about two inches long.

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<sup>90</sup> These books are not classified or archived. They are kept in rough order on a shelf in the Museum director's office on site. Since the room is not temperature controlled nor airtight, some of the older books are in quite delicate condition, with frayed and yellowed pages and fragile covers. Though I was unable to document every book, I was able to photograph all of the pages of seven books at Cape Coast Castle dating from 1988 to 2014, and three at a similar memorial site, the Elmina Castle, in April 2014. In August 2017, I was able to photograph excerpts of the current visitor book.

DATE	NAME	ADDRESS	REMARKS	DATE	NAME	ADDRESS	REMARKS
20/7/70	...	...	...	15/70	...	...	...
21/7/70	...	...	...	16/70	...	...	...
22/7/70	...	...	...	17/70	...	...	...
23/7/70	...	...	...	18/70	...	...	...
24/7/70	...	...	...	19/70	...	...	...
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3/8/70	...	...	...	29/70	...	...	...
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2/1/71	...	...	...	28/12/71	...	...	...
3/1/71	...	...	...	29/12/71	...	...	...
4/1/71	...	...	...	30/12/71	...	...	...
5/1/71	...	...	...	31/12/71	...	...	...

Figure 23 Cape Coast Visitor Book. Full-page view, 4.23.1970-1.25.1973. Photo courtesy of author.

When one opens up the notebook and lays it flat, one sees that each page starts the list over again, and the writing of the visitors is cramped, hurried. However, starting in the mid 1990s, the visitor lines extend across both pages, making the column for visitor comments twice as long. The visitor comments expand with this form.

9/1/2000	Atimede, Compa A	Nigerian	Accra/Lagos	I felt a sense of pain, suffering and death in the prisons, probably the dungeons. This statement on the plaque that ends with the temple that says humanity never persecute with inhumanity against humanity is one I often pray.
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Figure 24 Cape Coast Visitor Book excerpt. From volume 10.2.2010-8.17.11. Photo courtesy of author.

It is impossible to tell whether the memorial site staff changed the layout to accommodate lengthier comments or whether the layout invites this, but either way, the change is notable. The visitor comments start taking over several lines, some even writing paragraph-length comments.

Though there are many that react to the site in a similar way as in the earlier comment books, expressing appreciation for the site or affirming the importance of commemorating this history, many more take on a personal tone. In addition, many of the visitor comments expressed a desire to share a personal narrative, speaking of the journey they took to visit this place, of their parents, grandparents, or children. The earlier versions of the visitor comment books had a column for the visitors to note down their address, however, the ones from the mid-1990s onward asked not only for the address but for the nationality of the visitor. This placing of self geographically and genealogically can be read as an invitation, perhaps, to place one's personal history within the collective work of memory at the site.

Often, visitors seemed to catch on and adopt the posture of remembering the past at a physiological and intimate level as suggested by the material narrative of the tour guides. One visitor self-identified as coming from Senegal and the United States notes, "Getting to actually visit the dungeons was pretty intense. It made you feel like you were actually there in the past" (I.S. 12.28.2010). The sentiment is echoed in Ghanaian-New Yorker Muriel Appram's statement that "The tour was exceptional the area allows a feel of the time in which slavery took place" (5.13.2011), while someone who signed their name as Mary → Sha'Toka simply says, "Today I got to relive my past and understand my future" (7.22.2011). At first glance, the visitor books seem to signal a seamless integration of the personal into the collective, enabled and abetted by the material environment and affects of the space, that allow the memorial site to tap into an uncanny vividness by pointing to the past as something that is haunting, barely visibly, the

present. As Susan Pearce suggests, material objects “alone have the power, in some sense, to carry the past into the present by virtue of their ‘real’ relationship to past events” (24). In a way, the walls, floors, cannons and windows of the castle witnessed the human exploitation of the slave trade in the place of the visitors, whose physical proximity to these vicarious material witnesses allows them to better apprehend the event and its traumas and to participate in writing the future-history of this space: “I felt a sense of pain, suffering and death in the premises, particularly the dungeons. The statement on the plaque that ends with the prayer that ‘May humanity never perpetuate such in-humanity against humanity’ is ours. I also pray.” (Opeyemi A. A.; Dec 19, 2010; Fig 19)

However, as the visitor books themselves become witness of time, these horizontal surfaces memorialize other kinds of investments, projections, and interventions that rupture the narrative smoothly presently by the memorial site. There are comments that insist on persistent inequalities, interestingly, unabolished inequalities that are born out of those very geographic and genealogical differences recorded in the visitor books and that could provide axis of affinity. For example, reacting to the differences in entrance fee for local versus international visitors, a visitor named Cleopatra Dixon who cites herself as Jamaican-English and coming from London, writes, “Why do I have to pay the WHITE MAN’s rate, when I was originally stolen from here by him? This is a travesty” (4.10.2012). She is not the only diasporic African to take issue with the local/non-local definition. This splintering along the geographic lines that were supposed to be surpassed by genealogical ties is even rawer when the genealogy becomes an issue as well. Some visitors express anger at seeing “white people” or Europeans in the memorial sites, claiming that the descendants of the victims should not have to share their mourning with the descendants of the perpetrators (“wicked and evil EUROPEANS”), or even calling for them to



be banned from the site. Interestingly, other visitors from various racial backgrounds occasionally react to these comments with statements such as “We must forgive” or “One love,” either in their own message, or by writing in the margins next to the comment, even though the person who left the first comment is presumably gone and will not see the response left by the visitor that responded days, weeks, or even months later.

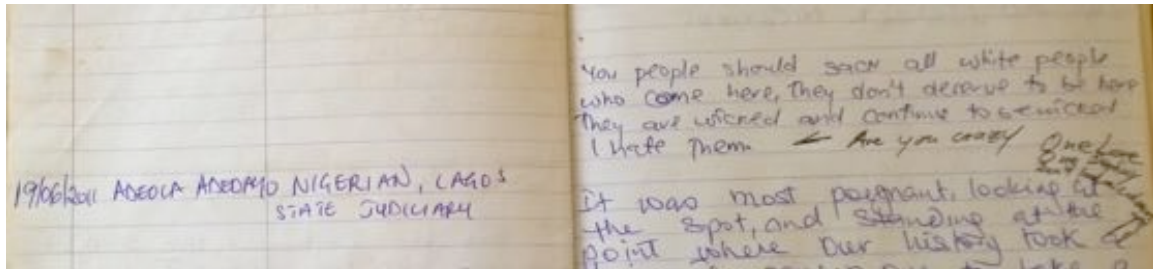


Figure 25 Visitor responding to previous comment. Cape Coast Visitor Book volume 10.2.2010-8.18.2011. Photo courtesy of author.

Very occasionally, a comment will point to the silence around the fact that there also would have been local peoples who aided the British and other Europeans in the slave trade.

Though the guided tour does not invest as much time in calling the figure of the perpetrator to the forefront, when the visitors bend over the books to materialize their thoughts in ink and on paper, the figure of the perpetrator looms large. Some visitors of white European descent express feelings of guilt and shame for the role that their ancestors would have played in the past. A British man writes, “It is horrific to envisage what my ancestors did” (Tom McLaughlin, 12.27.1992); another man writes “Embarrassing to be a Dane, when you hear about the history here” (Trine Huusom 3.27.1998). Others react to the comments that they should not be there, as Marianne Vetter from Switzerland who calls it “VERY SAD THAT SOME BLACK PEOPLE” do not want white people at the site, stating the “WE HUMANS” need to know our mistakes in order to learn from them (3.8.1998). On the other hand, Lape and Eni from Nigeria write, “White people—PAY US” and add a smiley face (9.30.2012). These visitors may all

belong to “We, the living,” but the visitor books create a space, if marginal, where the unavowed ways in which visitors belong differently to this history are traced.

I wonder, then, if the unity, the “We, the living” stated in the commemoration plaque that seeks to sweep up all of humanity, might be what Edwards calls a prosthetic unity. Calling on “we the living” to bear the burden of memory is a rhetorical strategy that mobilizes a broad unity, but at the expense of effacing the way the economic, political, and social burden of the history falls unevenly on the living. Edwards notes the way translation in the black diaspora has been and can be a mode that “forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkages only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor” (13); it can map the ground for a unity that holds space at its center for that resistant kernel of *décalage*<sup>91</sup>, a unity that begins by tracing the fractal fault lines that mean that any common ground we stand on will always be shifting. This non-prosthetic, limping unity is not, I would argue, what the Cape Coast Memorial site intended to create, but the materially-oriented aesthetics of its narrative make it possible to see the need for it, to call out for it, to claim it.

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I have pointed mostly to failures, shortcomings, blindsides in the memory and reconciliation work of both a contemporary art performance-installation and a memorial. My intent, however, is not to criticize Cape Coast or *Exhibit B* for failing to perfectly do the impossible. Rather, my intent is to sift through the rubble and find those shards that are cutting in the right places. Despite the fracture that is traced on the pages of the visitor notebooks, what I find interesting is that all of these different voices and affinities are held together in the same material space. That

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<sup>91</sup> What Edwards calls “the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of ‘differences within unity,’ an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed” (14).

proximity, these ugly feelings butt up against each other, ripple across other visitors' experiences. The pages of the comment books, with the visitor narratives written—in blue and red and black and other inks, in sometimes illegible writing, in all caps or cursive, some with robust and rounded letters and others spiky and lean—one after an other, sometimes coexisting peacefully, other times inviting or receiving confrontation, form an arbitrary community, bounded by the edges of the 8x11” pages. That co-habitation in the same space exemplifies the problem of belonging: “We the living” sharing physical space, material resources, cut across with different textures of longing. This “We the living,” is, I would argue, not a statement of natural unity but of inherent dis-unity, and the memory work that can be performed via aesthetics is not to find what we the living have in common, but find ways to elicit the desire to work across and with unsettling, unsettled, difference; to reroute desire and affects towards this unwelcome, but deeply needed, work.

## Chapter Four: ENCOUNTER

*“Glissant, in particular, has outlined the task of the postcolonial intellectual: it is to give shape to a nonessentialist aesthetics tied to the emergence of occluded oral cultures, to the articulation of a reality that emphasizes relational patterns over autonomous ones, interconnectedness over independence, isomorphic analogies over unified totalities, opacity over transparency...”*  
Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 245

Encounter.

I *encountered* Julien Creuzet on May 5, 2016 at the Dak’Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art. We had met previously, but the meeting with his artistic practice, which I call an encounter because it braided itself into my critical practice and changed its texture, took place in the second floor of a bookstore in the Mermoz neighborhood of Dakar, when Creuzet read excerpts of his poetry. “Read” should be understood loosely: he did not read as much as *pace* his text, circling out from the spot by the wall where he had discreetly placed himself before erupting into movement. He breathed the words into a small amplifier attached to his hip, rustling the syllables to the sway of a scraggly tree branch he had collected earlier on the street. The amplifier changed the timbre of his voice, layering it with nonhuman frequencies and increasing the density of its grain. He had not memorized the text he was performing, instead, he read from an iPhone, his voice slithering over lines of the poem that appeared on the screen. Creuzet composes and collects phrases on this device—his magic wand he calls it, keeper of and participant in his compositions. The poem emerges at the moment of reading, as he scrolls and snatches up fragments, all the while sauntering around the audience. My encounter with Creuzet’s artistic practice rendered tangible what I had been struggling to imagine through

words: a nonessentialist aesthetics that operates between and through the human and the material while nevertheless drawing from the particular cultural context of embodiment.

In this chapter, I am investigating how such an aesthetics can shape the way we articulate the relationship between diaspora and the world. More specifically, I will consider what Julien Creuzet's oeuvre suggests for a sense of self that emerges from the particular context of the black African diaspora, but moves through and cohabits with differently marked bodies and cultural environments. The previous two chapters traced some of the narrative and aesthetic forms and strategies deployed to claim belonging in a diasporic formation, either individually (Chapter 2) or collectively (Chapter 3). This chapter turns attention to how a self belongs to diaspora and the world—and, how the world belongs to diaspora. In that sense, it is like Chapter 1 in that it is concerned with the co-habitation of bodies that have undertaken different journeys; unlike Chapter 1, it does not explore how this co-habitation is imagined from the standpoint of the social body of the nation, rather, it seeks to articulate a non-hierarchical relationship that can nourish the particularities of embodied experiences, leveraging difference for rather than against inclusion. The question I pose to Creuzet's artwork—or rather, the question that Creuzet's work asked of me—is how might the forms he creates, forms which seek to materialize the relationship between the human and nonhuman, forms that press at the categories of agency and embodiment, braid themselves into a larger practice of diasporic ethics and aesthetics?

Though Creuzet's artistic practice will be the focal point of this chapter, a few words about his biography are necessary as they inform his work—and my reading of it. Creuzet is a multimedia artist of Martinican descent who was born in France, just outside of Paris in Le Blanc-Mesnil. He “returned” to Martinique soon after his birth and was raised there. An overseas department of France, Martinique is one of the islands in the Lesser Antilles archipelago. Its

currency is the Euro, its official language is French, its residents are citizens of France with all the rights of French citizens, and the Department of Education runs the school system as it runs all the schools in other departments. Thus, politically, it is part of the French national territory, yet geologically it is a separate body located thousands of miles of ocean away from the mainland. Politically, it belongs to the European Union, though as an Outermost Territory of France, it is not part of the Schengen Area nor the EU Value Added Tax Area. Geologically, it is part of a volcanic arc of islands, the Lesser Antilles, that defines the easternmost boundary of the Caribbean. Linguistically, though French is the official language, nearly the entire population speaks Antillean Creole. Culturally, the inhabitants are descendants of African men and women who were enslaved and brought over to work the sugar plantations, mixed primarily with Indo-Martiniquais (descendants of indentured laborers from India of Tamil origin), Amerindian, and French.

The history and culture of Martinique is deeply entwined with the story of colonization, slavery, and the African diaspora. As a geologic topos situated outside of France, we could consider it a marginal space, and yet this topos holds space for the whole history of a global encounter. To be from Martinique is to be the product and process of diaspora. One could consider Creuzet a diasporic artist because of this Afro-Caribbean ancestry. However, Creuzet's personal biography complicates this diasporic identity even further, given that he was born outside of Paris, left for Martinique, and eventually went back to France to attend an *école des beaux arts*, and has more or less remained there since, though his residencies take him to other parts of Europe, the United States, and Africa. In this regard, he is a migratory subject, as well as

a product of diaspora. Yet, even though he is regarded as a “stranger” when he is in France,<sup>92</sup> he moves across these geographic bodies with the privileges of French citizenship, as Martinique belongs politically to France. Thus, just as it is imprecise to say that Creuzet “returns” to Martinique, it is imprecise to say he “immigrates” to France. I choose to place him in this context of double displacement—both diaspora and migration and neither one—not only because, as I will argue later, his work invites it, but because I believe it can usefully trouble the notion of boundaries as external entities, and complicate the ideal of multicultural assimilation propagated by France that reinforces the norm of national Republican identity (see Chapter 1). How might a discourse of national identity change, if attention is paid to the strangers that are already in the national body? But also, how might pressing on the overlap between diaspora and migration serve to better account for entangled and mobile subjectivities?

However, Creuzet’s oeuvre is relevant to my investigation of the different ways that a diasporic sense of self is constructed or expressed not only for his personal biography, but for the aesthetic approach he employs. As the examples in this chapter will illustrate, his works tease out the meeting point between mediums. His mixed-media sculptures rhyme visually with each other, his performances blend in writing and writing is part of the performance, the aural quality of his performed poetry is dense and malleable material that he sculpts through movement, while the texts he writes down are displayed as visual objects. His work, furthermore, explores the meeting point between the self and its subjective expression. An implicit “I” haunts many of his

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<sup>92</sup> As touched on in Chapter 1, France’s “prevailing discourse of colorblind indivisibility, designating nonetheless an *unmarked normative whiteness* intrinsic to a powerful Republican ideology expressed in the narratives, symbols, and representations of French national identity” leave no space and no cultural scripts for a nonwhite French identity (Keaton et al., 2012; 2; italics mine). As a result, people of color are implicitly assumed to be non-French immigrants are descendants of immigrants regardless of their actual birthplace, citizenship, or country of residency. See Tricia Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley’Whiting, and Tyler Stovall’s edited volume *Black France/France Noire* for a comprehensive discussion on the relationship between Blackness and Frenchness and its recent changes.

exhibition projects and individual pieces, with the titles and texts that accompany his sculptures, installations, and videos written in the first person. The texts slip in autobiographical (or plausibly autobiographical) details—though, as I will discuss later on, where this “I” begins and another subject’s “I” begins is often opaque. Similarly, his artworks frequently implicate his physical body, either by a live performance, by filming himself in the video art, or by incorporating personal, intimate belongings (e.g. clothing) that symbolically as well as materially bring attention to way race, gender, and cultural identity imprint themselves on a body.<sup>93</sup> There is furthermore a strong presence of transportation vehicles in his filmic process. Creuzet often films from inside of moving vehicles, capturing not the vessel itself but the movement of the environment around it. The ocean, as well as the landscape or plant life from Martinique, appear frequently in his oeuvre. These elements together create a visual vocabulary that refers, if obliquely, to movement across geographical bodies—in other words, to migration—and its relationship to practices of identity.

Before moving on to a discussion of Creuzet’s work in this context of human movement, I want to consider my choice and use of the word migration as an analytical lens. Terms such as immigrant, refugee, exiled person, the displaced person, the nomad, and diasporic subject are political as well as social categories that speak to particular conditions of movement. Though they may overlap, it is important to keep these distinctions alive. I say this because there is a tendency, in critical and popular discourse, to deploy migration *metaphorically* in such a way that literal migration becomes erased (see Ahmed 2000, 80-86). Migration in such a deployment

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<sup>93</sup> Clothing, serving as a modular surface and “second skin,” has been strategically deployed by black men in Paris to counter the invisibility and refashion the image of black men in a white-dominated and Euro-centric culture that has no cultural scripts for black agency (see Tanya Camela Logan’s dissertation *Dressing Masculinity Among Black Men in Paris since the 1970s*). Creuzet’s choice to incorporate articles of clothing into his artworks must be considered in this context of negotiating cultural identity and agency.



becomes a sign for the transgression of boundaries, and becomes generalized as a foundational aspect of human: something “we” can all claim as a shared experience, regardless of the specificities of each of our lived experiences. Iain Chambers, for example, will use migrancy to speak to identity and thought as dislocated processes in themselves, a form of transgressive thinking that assumes the privilege of choice: choosing to transgress, choosing to dislocate oneself, from a home one *already* has. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti speaks of nomadism as a way to form a new practice of subjectivity that works against linear thinking and rootedness. The conflation between the different experiences and conditions of movement within phenomena such as migration and displacement, risks making movement across geographic areas appear as a choice, one we all have equal access to and one that produces equal effects. It also creates a binary in which “home” is immobile, stable, and preconstituted.

I am sensitive to Chambers and Braidotti’s arguments—and their desire to work against the limitations of essentialized thought and identity. However, I suggest that scholars must (1) keep the embodied and particular lived experiences of migration in conversation with its metaphors, in order to account for the multiple conditions and effects of migration, and (2) that making migrancy the privileged site of transgressive thinking can lead us to miss the opportunity to examine the ways in which home-making and being-at-home can become generative sites of resistance, opposition, and contestation as well. In keeping migration and related terms first and foremost as experiences that must be examined within their temporal, historical, material specificities, we are better able to pull back and examine how such experiences are deployed as metaphor in order to *rework* those very metaphors that condition our critical and popular understanding of experiences of human movement across geographic and geologic boundaries. I treat these different phenomena as isomorphic analogies: some of their structures correspond

though the whole is not the same. The aim of identifying the parts of the whole that are analogous is not to arrive at a new truth of diaspora and migration. Rather, the hope is to develop a discourse that deploys nonessentialist aesthetics, building solidarity across difference while holding space for the particular and the political, not only in experience of migration but in experiences of being-at-home.

***Opacity in the Narration of the Self: Glissant and Bennett in Conversation***

As I will demonstrate, Creuzet's process and poetics of narrating the self resonate with the challenges to being and belonging (and its narration) that *Kétala*, *Becoming Abigail*, *Exhibit B*, and the Cape Coast Castle brought up. The works I will analyze come from two of Creuzet's recent exhibitions, and one publication titled *J'ai quitté Paris* [I left Paris]. One of the exhibitions is an ongoing project titled *Opéra-Archipel* [Archipelago-Opera] to which Creuzet has added pieces, variations, and publications since it was first exhibited in 2015. The other is a small collaborative exhibition, titled *Corps sans tête* [Headless Body], that was installed at a tiny art gallery in Paris in January 2017. Important to my reading of Creuzet's oeuvre will be Édouard Glissant's theory of the poetics of relation. In *La poétique de la relation* (The Poetics of Relation; 1990), Glissant sketches a literary history of cultural identity, noting in particular the tension between a vision of human culture that tends to extol unity, essentialism, and universal truths, and one that mixes, relativizes, and particularizes. He traces the development of tropes like the nomad and the exiled, and of processes like diaspora, creolization, and migration, and of theories of identity and culture that have been formed out of or against these elements. Overall, Glissant aims to propose an open-ended model of being. He envisions a process of self-definition that is predicated on Relation as opposed to Unity: an identity that is forged through encounters with others.

While a Glissantian poetics of relation is complex and can be read in contradictory ways, there are a few specific elements that are salient to Creuzet's oeuvre and the work of this chapter. I will briefly outline these aspects, rather than perform an extensive reading of Glissant's poetics of relation, since such a reading is beyond the scope and interest of this project. What I do need discuss in some detail is how the notion of *encounter* works in *La poétique de la relation*, and what *opacity* contributes to this poetics. First, as mentioned, in Glissant's poetics, the self is created out of interactions with people, places, and cultures—one's own and, more importantly, others'. What he takes care to complicate is that, even when the encounter contains an element of chance or surprise, the conditions that make the interactions possible may be historically contingent. In other words, not all encounters are created in equal conditions. So while in his poetics, relation (encounter, interaction, transformation) is positively charged, the circumstances and the moment of encounter itself may produce or be the product of violence and deep injustice.

In fact, Glissant begins *La poétique de la relation* with five vivid pages that describe the belly of a slave ship on the transatlantic passage. For him, this is a transformational moment in the history of the world. People from different parts of the African continent encounter, in the closest of quarters, each other. They are thrown into a fraught relationship with people from Europe and the Americas. The lives they will build, the social organizations that will erupt from this violent encounter (the plantation system, the structure of colonial administration, the transatlantic trade) will radically transform the history of the world.<sup>94</sup> Though the world was

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<sup>94</sup> This experience of displacement and remaking of social and cultural relations was not chosen nor lived consciously by the individuals who were forced or born into systems of slavery. Glissant notes: "Les peuples qui ont fréquenté le gouffre ne se vantent pas d'être élus. Ils ne croient pas enfanter la puissance des modernités. Ils vivent la Relation, qu'ils déchiffrent" (20; [People who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it] Wing 8).

always already in relation, for Glissant, this moment births a new world whose survival will depend on living in and being open to perpetual Relation. Thus, while living in, being open to, Relation is universal in that Glissant sees it as both an ability and a necessity for all cultures if they are to coexist—peacefully, and equitably—in the world, it is particular in that it has *particularly* marked the African, diasporic experience.<sup>95</sup> And even more particularly the African Caribbean experience. This propensity for relation, that holds diasporic experiences at the center rather than the margins, I will call, after Glissant, an archipelagic consciousness<sup>96</sup>: an identification with diaspora that recognizes the historical conditions of its emergence, and looks out at the world from this place of diaspora, so that “symbiotic transcultural exchanges among groups interacting in systematically creative states of tensions” becomes a practice of diaspora that is proper to the world (Lionnet 9).

This brings us to the other element of Glissant’s notion of encounter that will be important to understand for my analysis of Creuzet’s work: irreducibility. Though Glissant stresses that all parties are modified in the encounter with others, he also insists that there is a kernel of difference that persists. Encounter does not erase; it multiplies. This is why he will build his poetics out of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome. Glissant proclaims:

La racine est unique, c’est une souche qui prend tout sur elle et tue alentour ;  
[Deleuze et Guattari] lui opposent le rhizome qui est une racine démultipliée,

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<sup>95</sup> He is, at the same time, fond of reminding his listeners that all humans initially dispersed from the African continent—Africa as the cradle of humanity. Nevertheless, he will reclaim this propensity to relation as a condition of the African existence, saying: “Consequently, we can say that in the African condition there is a kind of vocation to go elsewhere. And when there is a mixture of African and something else—well, it’s Africa that’s dominant, because of that vocation, not for racial or historical reasons” (Ostrander and Mosaka 2015; 60).

<sup>96</sup> The notion of the Archipelago, more than Paul Gilroy’s formation of the Atlantic, in Glissant’s poetics, better captures the principle of Relation: “The diaspora is exploding forth everywhere; it is not concentrated in a single area. So for me the Atlantic is a continent, not an archipelago. And we are inhabitants of an archipelago. [...] So I’m not an Atlanticist, nor am I continental. I think that archipelagization of the deportation of the Africans is a reality, a precious one” (Ostrander and Mosaka 2015, 58)

étendue en réseaux dans la terre ou dans l'air, sans qu'aucune souche y intervienne en prédateur irrémédiable. La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l'enracinement, mais récuse l'idée d'une racine totalitaire. (23)

The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this [Deleuze and Guattari] propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of the totalitarian root. (Wing 11)

A rooted bit of the self persists, but this root is spreading outward and allying itself with other, horizontal roots that reach out and out rather than deep and down. And for Glissant, it should be like so. He vehemently insists that multiplication does not lead to a “blending into some indescribable soup” (Ostrander and Mosaka 2015; 62). Rather, the points of contact make more differences visible even as they trigger mixing.

The emphasis on irreducible elements of identity, that persist as differences, lead up to the final element of Glissant's poetics of relation that I wish to introduce to my discussion of Creuzet's oeuvre. That is the concept of opacity. If irreducibility points to a persistent multiplication, opacity conveys a persistent incommensurability. It accentuates the untranslatable: that which cannot be understood, that which will never be limpid. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Brent Hayes Edwards argues for translation as one of the key diasporic practices, because it makes space for “the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of ‘differences within unity,’ an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed” (14). The untranslatable, that which remains opaque, signals for Edwards the moments of difference and disagreement without which diaspora as a unifying territory would reproduce the oppressions and exclusions it sought to maneuver around.

It is no surprise that Edwards' phrases step in rhythm with Glissant, who likewise considers holding space for opacity an inevitable and essential move of the archipelagic consciousness. Glissant is careful not to exoticize this quality, refusing to make it proper to the Other. Opacity is part of every culture, and does not signal a closing in on oneself. On the contrary, one's own opacities might remain invisible to one's own eyes without Relation—without an encounter with difference. Glissant argues for the importance of holding space for opacity because he insists that understanding will never be the outcome and it must not be the impulse to encounter and interact with another:

Il ne m'est pas nécessaire que je le 'comprenne' pour me sentir solidaire de lui, pour bâtir avec lui, pour aimer ce qu'il fait. Il ne m'est pas nécessaire de tenter de devenir l'autre (de devenir autre) ni de le 'faire' à mon image. Ces projets de transmutations—sans métempsychose—sont résultés de pires prétentions et des plus hautes générosités de l'Occident. (207)

To feel in solidarity with [the other] or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image. These projects of transmutation—without metempsychosis—have resulted from the worst pretensions and greatest of magnanimities on the part of West. (Wing 193)

Glissant, in other words, warns against assimilating difference, as assimilation is a remaking of difference into sameness. The structures of feeling that animate empathy cannot be predicated on comprehension, because empathy must cut across not only difference but disagreement.

Moreover, as discussed briefly in the previous chapter through Edward Saïd's work, knowledge and power work in concert to reproduce uneven economic, social, and political relationships.

This was perhaps the hubris that led to the failure, as discussed in Chapter Three, of *Exhibit B* to create solidarity and action across racial lines: the hubris of believing that one can see and understand the position of another "as it really is." Trying to see through difference, attempting to render it as limpid as a window to another world, may create a mirror.

I will return to opacity during my analysis, but before moving back to Creuzet, I want to bring in a discussion of Jane Bennett's work on vibrant materiality that I've touched on in previous chapters. Despite a shared interest in developing an ontological vocabulary that moves away from the binaries that structure humankind's relationship with reality, Bennett's work in the field of political philosophy has been overlooked in cultural studies. Bennett proposes that our understanding of human vs. nonhuman, organic vs. inorganic, live vs. dead matter conditions the field of human agency and thus *limits* the possible sources and resources for action. She suggests that if humanity is going to exist ethically and sustainably, we must consider how actions are not solely the product of human will, agency, and consciousness, but the products of human and nonhuman material bodies interacting together. Bennett seeks to narrate and "*experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally" and promotes "an understanding of agency as a confederation of human and non-human elements [that would] alter established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability" (2010; 10, 21).

Bennett's project of reworking the models of agency resonates with (Françoise Lionnet's reading of) Glissant: "it is only by imagining nonhierarchical modes of relation among cultures that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity. These are the issues that compel us in this fin-de-siècle, for our "green dirt-ball" will survive only if we respect the differences among its people" (5). I believe that in bringing Bennett's work to bear on our understanding of the ontological conditions of living in, with, and through diaspora, we might be better able to respond "to the task of the postcolonial intellectual" that Françoise Lionnet articulates via Glissant: "to give shape to a nonessentialist aesthetics tied to the emergence of occluded oral cultures, to the articulation of a reality that emphasizes relational patterns over

autonomous ones, interconnectedness over independence, isomorphic analogies over unified totalities, opacity over transparency...” (Lionnet 245). Indeed, Glissant’s open-ended model of being in the world, built on encounter and interaction, shares a vocabulary in parts with Bennett’s metaphysics. Bennett’s attention to encounter and interaction between (materially) differing bodies, as well as her emphasis on flattening traditional hierarchies of power and multiplying sources of action and empathy, if it does not echo Glissant, it at the very least rhymes with him, despite the divergent context.<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, one of the points where Bennett and Glissant converge is Deleuze and Guattari. Glissant, as mentioned earlier, proclaims that “La pensée rhizomatique serait au principe de ce que j’appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre” (23; [Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other] Wing 11). Bennett, on her side, takes up the related notion of assemblage as one of the principles of her theory of vibrant materiality. Riffing on Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Bennett describes assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (23). She puts this notion at the core her work, explaining: “an idea that I will put to

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<sup>97</sup> The first divergence to note is Glissant’s cultural emphasis, while Bennett situates her discussion in an ontological conversation. In other words, while Glissant is proposing a model of being, he is building his investigation and argument out of the context of culture; he explores the linguistic, racial, and political conditions that shape the field of human action. Out of the specific condition of being black and Antillean, Glissant proposes a universal poetics. Bennett, on the other hand, hones in on the way the material, rather than cultural, environment conditions the possibilities for human agency and subjectivity, seeking to extrapolate a new ontological vocabulary from this investigation. I in no way mean to suggest that the cleavage between these two contexts and contributions—the cultural vs the material, the poetic vs. the ontological—cuts cleanly. On the contrary, the edges rag at and overlap each other. There is an implicit (Anglo-American and continental philosophic) cultural context to Bennett’s work. Her examples come primarily from events that have taken place in the United States, and in her own life as a professor at an East Coast university. Her theoretical grounds have their (rhizomatic) roots in German, French, British, and American philosophy and literature. And Glissant, if working out of and paying attention to cultural and historical conditions, is nevertheless proposing a model and mode of being—an ontological understanding of these conditions, after all.



work for vital materialism, is this: bodies enhance their power *in* or *as a heterogeneous assemblage*” (23). In both the rhizome and the assemblage, we see the importance of heterogeneity and of relation: disparate elements, but moving together, if momentarily, in the same direction; or inhabiting, for a time, the same context. And: making something happen.

Thus, for me, Glissant and Bennett converge and diverge. Their separate fields of inquiry, and the problems that they seek to address, have relegated them to separate spheres of reading. Reading them together, however, exposes elements that are under-articulated in each of them, as a rhyme might hone attention to a particular syllable or sound. Creuzet’s oeuvre, I will argue, materializes and may help us articulate the convergences and divergences of Bennett and Glissant’s theories. In so doing, his work may model ways of being and belonging that do not structure the narrative of the diasporic experience through the logic of departure, arrival, nor return. And finally, his work may provide a way of thinking about touching and being touched, in a collective social body, that creates favorable conditions for the ethical encounter between differentiated strangers.

### ***Des bouts de nous-mêmes: Aesthetics of Texture in Migration Stories***

In the works by Creuzet that I have selected for this chapter, the idea of a heterogeneous multiplicity is evident from the start, in their two titles. As art critic Noémie Monier notes in her review of *Opéra-Archipel*:

le choix de termes ne doit en effet rien laisser au hasard : “opéra,” en référence à cette forme d’art total où l’espace scénique est celui où convergent musique, chant, mise en mouvement du corps et composition visuelle et plastique; “archipel” renvoie à une espace géographique où la prolifération d’îlots est conditionné par l’alternance entre immersion et submersion qui caractérise les points de rencontre entre terre et mer

the choice of terms is, indeed, no coincidence: ‘opera’ referring to that total form of art in which, in the theatrical space, music, song, bodily movement and visual and sculptural compositions converge; ‘archipelago’ recalling a geographic space where the proliferation of little islands is determined by the transitions between

immersion and submersion that leave their mark on the meeting points between land and sea

*Le Chassis* 2016, 15<sup>98</sup>

As for *Corps sans tête*, a body without a head, this image points to a self whose coherence does not come from a sense of being-whole, but from being dis-membered. There appears to be both multiplication and modification in the images evoked by Creuzet's titles. There is separation of members but also a sense of paradoxical assemblage: geologic and biologic bodies that are held together by a cleavage, and are in the process of becoming.

The closing lines of the poem Creuzet wrote as an extended title of the *Corps sans tête* exhibition read as follows: “des bouts de nous-mêmes, / nos organes externes, mis en relation” ([bits and ends of our-selves, / our external organs, set in rapport]; translation mine) The image these words offer may seem puzzling: our bits and ends, cut off from a body, the separation allowing them to become external organs that interact with each other. Reading these lines in the gallery in Paris, I was immediately transported to another space: the room in the novel *Kétala* where Mémoria's belongings gather together to tell the story of her life (see Chapter 2). As they tell this story, they repeatedly insist “Chacun de nous est une trace de l'histoire de Mémoria; si on nous sépare les uns des autres, il ne restera plus rien de notre maîtresse ” ([Each one of us holds a trace of Mémoria's story; if they separate us from each other, nothing will remain of our mistress]; 17, translation mine). As I showed in Chapter Two, in the process of telling Mémoria's life story, her material belongings become a part of her, and she a part of them. Given this intimate and mutual constitution, one could think of her belongings precisely as external organs. They are vital pieces of her organism, though they operate in the space outside of the skin of her

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<sup>98</sup> All translations in this chapter are mine, unless alternative bibliographic information is cited.

body. Calling Mémoria's belongings her external organs rhymes<sup>99</sup> with Sarah Doraghi's language at the *Musée National de l'histoire de l'immigration*, who called the pillowcase she donated, which smelled like the mother she left behind in Tehran, a bit of umbilical cord (see Chapter One). The repeated appearance of material belongings that function as external organs in migration narratives bears exploring.

What does thinking of nonhuman material bodies as external organs allow us to do? It may echo what Brent Hayes Edwards describes as the essential work of understanding diaspora: “it forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkages only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor. [...] Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is *only* difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows movement (13; 15). Let us separate, then, bones and members, organs and “des bouts des nous-mêmes,” and see what happens in this space of movement.

\* \* \*

I go back to that gallery in Paris, to the *Corps sans tête* exhibit. A red sweater hangs on the wall. This is one of Creuzet's sculptures, whose full title is as follows:

En sueur, fatras, vieux baton.  
couleuvre, couleur, roi des  
hommes.  
Ta tige de roseau est devenue  
ton canon.  
Mon pull en laine

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<sup>99</sup> As Charles Baxter develops it, rhyming actions in narratives are plot points that produce uncanny resonances with other moments of action. These resonant events do not serve to predict, rather they serve to reflect: “Prophecy run forward gives the prophet the power of forecasting and a habit of denunciation. Prophecy run backward, into rhyming action or déjà vu, gives the participant power of understanding. A forward prophetic power is worldly and has something to do with magic and foresight; a reverse prophecy, a sense of rhymed events, is unworldly and has to do with insight. It moves us back into ourselves” (Baxter 619). Though Baxter speaks of rhyming actions within a single text, I strive to note the rhyming actions *between* texts. The “rhymes” are not conscious citations or explicit intertextual references. Framing these repetitions as rhymes rather than as instances of intertextuality allows me to tease out connections not only between texts, but across mediums, objects, and events. It serves in this dissertation as a mode of reading non-linearly, emphasizing the rhymes and resonances rather than causes, effects, and lineages.

loge l'hémoglobine,  
après un hiver toujours rude  
dans le Doubs.

2017, pull-over, canne à sucre, aubier de chêne, corde, câble, électrique, citron

Sweating, jumble, old stick.  
garden snake, color, king of  
men.

Your reed's stem has become  
your cannon.

My wool sweater  
hosts red blood cells,  
after a still harsh winter  
in Doubs.

2017, sweater, sugar cane, oak alburnum, rope, electric cable, lemon

Is this red sweater, presumably worn by the artist during his winter residency in Besançon in the Doubs department of France, an external organ? The stanza of the title-poem that ends with the line about “nos organes externes, mis en relation” begins with the question: “Comprends-tu le sens de notre entemêlement ? / Te fais-tu à l'idée que l'espace de La Maëlle Galerie, / sera le lieu où tout prendra corps” [Do you understand what our mingling means? / Can you accept that the Maëlle Galerie's space / will be the place where everything will take form]. The Maëlle Galerie is the space in Paris where this exhibition takes place. The poem identifies it as the site where everything will take form (take on a body, literally, in French). The stanza speaks of a triple-headed serpent (three artists collaborated for this exhibit). Furthermore, it evokes, perhaps, the night of the exhibit opening: “On that grand immortal evening we will toast this moment / of sharing, bits and pieces of ourselves / our external organs, placed in rapport” ([On trinquera le grand soir immortel cet instant / de partage, des bouts de nous-mêmes, / nos organes externes, mis en relation]; translation mine). Given that the poem speaks of the place of the exhibition itself, of the a mixing of mediums and of a three-fold collaboration, one can infer that the “bouts de nous-même” that are set in conversation are the different artworks created by the three artists to inhabit the dialogic space of the exhibition.

So, to return to my question, is this red sweater an external organ? If yes, what does it tell us? Let's look at it.



Figure 26 *En sueur, fatras (...)* At Maëlle Galerie in Paris, France. Photo courtesy of author.

It is a red knit sweater, whose weave creates a nubby texture. It is suspended at an angle, with the sweater's arms reaching up and to the left. Electric cables and rope bind together four pieces of wood (oak sapwood, as the label notes, which is a tree's tender, young wood, full of sap) to form

a single, irregular staff. This staff is suspended—precariously it seems to me—by a red cable that hangs on a small hook in the wall. One of the sweater’s arms is tied tightly at the wrist by this red cable, which also wraps around the wood pieces in two places to hold them together. The tied-up wrist looks painful. The other sleeve of the sweater is inserted into the staff. The pointed tip of one of the pieces of wood juts into the elbow, creating a pointy, unnatural angle and deforming the even spacing of the sweater’s textured pattern. From this sharper point, however, the left side of the sweater’s torso drapes down, creating a tender fold.

I am surprised at how alive—or *lively*, to echo Jane Bennett—this assemblage of wool yarn, electric cable, and oakwood feel. Reading the title poem accentuates the sculpture’s vibrancy. It is a sweating jumble, the title tells us, and houses drops of blood. This proximity with bodily fluids reminds me again of *Kétala* (discussed in Chapter Two), when Mémoria’s dress remembers being drenched in Mémoria’s hopeful sweat the day that she packed up her belongings to move to France, dreaming of a better life there. But perhaps it echoes even more forcefully with the protagonist in *Becoming Abigail* (see Chapter Two) who attempts to remember the mother she never knew by hiding photos of her mother under her clothes, letting the photos chafe at her skin until she bleeds and her skin scabs and scars.

What each of these examples—the sweater sculpture, the fictional dress in *Kétala*, and the chaffing photos in *Becoming Abigail*—highlight is an interaction at the surface that results in a change in texture: sweat weighs down fabric, changing its drape, its tackiness, its surface to the touch; blood dries and leaves rough bits embedded in the skin of a sweater in a sculpture, or the skin of a young girl in a novel. It is a *tactile* encounter between strange, materially differing bodies, human and nonhuman, that leaves a textural trace. Though in *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail* the interaction takes place primarily at an individual level, and produces textural changes

on the human characters and their material belongings, I will argue that through Creuzet's work we can expand the stage where tactile encounters take place. These tactile encounters will provide a way of thinking about encounters that texture the social body.

Texture as an aesthetic element, I will argue, has a particular role in Creuzet's work. Texture, furthermore, will become key reworking the metaphors of and for migration. One quality of texture to keep in mind is that it cannot be contained to a single sense. Though closely related to touch, it is neither exclusively haptic nor exclusively optic. I can "see" the texture of Creuzet's sweater without touching it (one is not allowed to touch art, after all!), just as you might see the texture of a cashmere cardigan at a department store and instinctively reach out to touch it to verify that it *feels* as tender as it *looks*. Indeed, Eve Sedgwick, in her exploration of the relationship between texture and affect, will note that "other senses beyond the haptic are involved in the perception of texture, as when we *hear* the brush-brush of corduroy trousers or the crunch of extra-crispy chicken" (15). Another notable quality of texture is that it is not stable across scale. Standing on the opposite side of the gallery, I may not notice that Creuzet's sweater is anything but red. It may look smooth from a distance. Only when I'm closer will I see its nubby weave. And when I zoom in to the photos I took of it, I may no longer want to use the word "nubby" to describe it, preferring "hairy" because at this scale, the individual tiny threads that are twisted into strands of yarn rear up their fraying heads.

The multisensorial and unstable nature of texture may be a rich way to begin thinking of the splitting of skin in a tactile encounter. The skin can be thought of as a boundary. The edge of a 'me' that keeps me from becoming 'you.' Or, the surface that makes you 'Other.' As mentioned in previous chapter, Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, evinces with surgical precision how black men's skin functions as a totalizing signifier of their Other-ed subjectivity in

the wake of the colonial encounter, in spite of the shared language, education, and citizenship with white French inhabitants of the metropole. The epidermization of Otherness is the legacy of slavery and colonialism that haunts the formation of social bodies today.<sup>100</sup> Ethnographer Clifford Geertz, in a famous lecture in 1985—delivered, coincidentally, at the place where I write, the University of Michigan—argued that the increasingly cosmopolitan world in which he predicted we would live was one where “Foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s” (112). Skin, thus, is the boundary that moves with the body. It carries with it a set of associations that can invite identification or rejection. And yet, like many boundaries, skin is an imperfect border.

Foreignness may start at the skin’s edge, but the skin is a responsive surface. Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed notes: “the skin that contains the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression; just think of goosebumps, textures on the skin surface, as bodily traces of the coldness of air” (2006; 20). Environmental factors create bodily traces: dry skin in a hard wind; peeling blisters in a strong sun. Geographical movement—migration, displacement, diaspora—results in encounters with different environments. Because of this, Ahmed proposes that, “migration involves reinhabiting the skin: the different impressions of a new landscape, the air, the smells, the sounds, which accumulate like points, to create new lines, or which accumulate like lines, to create new textures on the surfaces of the skins” (1998, 9). Ahmed enriches our understanding of skin as signifier of difference by paying attention to its modularity—its non-essential traits that might (at times willingly, at times less willingly) be modified.

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<sup>100</sup> Lisa Lowe writes that “*Race* as a mark of colonial difference is an enduring remainder of the processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the people who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten” (7).



The different environments that Ahmed describes are not solely material, but social, and their effects are socially textured as well as materially textured. Ahmed writes, “Feminist, queer, and critical race philosophers have shown us how social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others, and they have identified the intercorporeal aspects of bodily dwelling” (1998, 5). In other words, “difference” is not the pre-existing baggage that each person carries with them into a particular space. Rather, differences are produced through the process of bodies arriving, and dwelling, in a particular space as I discussed in my reading of Chandra Mohanty and Audre Lorde’s narratives in the Introduction to this dissertation. I wonder, then, if the story of migration could be told not through the plot structure of arriving, as the *Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration* tells it (see Chapter 1), but as a story of *texturing*. If, as Ahmed claims, “migration involves re-inhabiting the skin” (2006; 9), what can the textural trails in Creuzet’s aesthetics tell us about migration and its metaphors? To put it differently, what would a story of displacement, diaspora, migration, tell us if its narrative plot traced not the dispersal from an origin, nor the integration into a destination, nor a desire for (an impossible) return, but the changing texture of skin along a journey? The sweater’s blood-red, goose-bumped texture, the way sharp boughs pierce the sleeves, suggest that the texturing will be at times violent, though the softness of its weave and drape also suggest elements of tenderness in texturing. The subsequent sections will follow Creuzet’s textural trail to examine its relationship to a potential nonessentialist aesthetics of diaspora and migration.

### ***Sa peau décosue: Tactile Relations in the Aesthetics of Texture***

The sweater acted as Creuzet’s second skin for one long cold winter, a barrier between him and the frigid air. Its nubby texture makes me think of goose bumps. This textural similarity invites us to imagine the sweater as Creuzet’s second skin. All the more so knowing that it contains the traces of his sweat and blood. Creuzet has amputated this second skin and stretched

it out on a wall, binding it to other material bodies (the oak wood, the electric cables). What does this gesture tell us? How does this gesture tell a story, particularly a story of being and belonging? In the poem that accompanied the *Corps sans tête* exhibition, one line reads: “His cadaver writhing, unstitched skin / gutted, blue lattices” ([Son cadavre gisait, sa peau décosue / éviscéré, des entrelacs bleus]; Creuzet 2017). The body bursts out of its seams in this line, oozing out of the boundaries that the skin sets. “Blue lattices” strikes me as a surprisingly pretty way to describe intestines, and I hold on to that color, blue.

In another exhibition at a different gallery in Paris—a larger one, on a small street a hop-not-even-a-skip away from the imposing Centre Georges Pompidou for contemporary art—I encounter a pair of denim cut-off shorts. These cut-offs hang upside down, one leg pinned to a blue panel. It is another one of Creuzet’s sculptures, this one titled *D’une intensité, cyan (...)* [Cyan, of a certain intensity (...)].

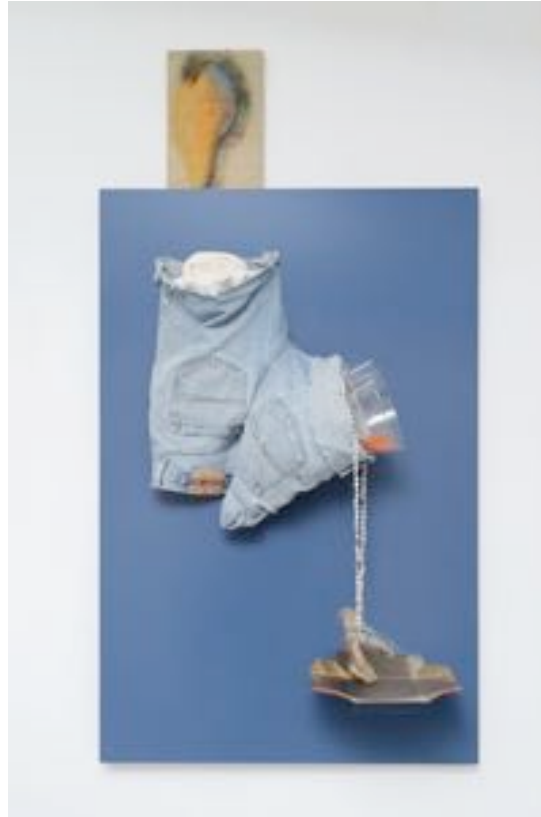


Figure 27 *D'une intensité, cyan (...)* at Galerie Dohyang Lee in Paris, France. Photo by Aurélien Mole.

In this sculpture, the pinned-up leg of the shorts' hangs flat, its outer edge falling away from the wall in a flaccid fold. The frayed denim edges clump, like mold, into small white tufts that sprout from the lighter blue of the jean material. The other leg splays out, akimbo. This leg envelops a clear vase that peeks out from the leg opening. The vase fills out the leg and waist as if there were a limb inside. The tautness of this leg accentuates the emptiness of its partner leg. From the vase hangs a piece of driftwood, connected by a delicate bead necklace. The driftwood, which might be two pieces of wood cobbled together, has an oblong, flattish bottom and a V-shaped branch protruding out of it.

Somehow, in my notes hastily written in the gallery, I had noted down this object not as a piece of driftwood but as a shoe. It could be shoe-like, with the V-branch recalling a flip-flop sandal, or the graceful recline of a high-heeled sandal's strap. But it could resemble many other

things. I suspect that my misremembering was provoked by the driftwood's position directly below the short's leg, and the way that the slim string necklace connects the two objects as a fleshy leg, like a string piercing through beads, would connect pant to shoe. This assemblage of materially differing objects embodies the kind of multiplicity that Glissant speaks about. The sculpture is composed of heterogeneous parts and its identity comes out of these parts, but it *becomes* something when I enter the assemblage: when I, observer, writer, critic, encounter and engage it, within the conditions it offers me.<sup>101</sup>

In a similar fashion, I encounter an earlobe. In *Cyan*, an abstract drawing is attached to the top of the blue panel where the jean cut-offs hang. The drawing is of a misshapen oval with contours traced on the inside. It reminds me of an ear. Again, it could resemble many things, or no thing at all. It could be that I have a habit of tugging at my own ear when I write, so this particular bodily appendage is absent-mindedly on my mind as I go through my photos and struggle to make out what this drawing could be. Writing is, after all, another tactile encounter, between hand and keyboard or pen and paper, between writer and subject or writer and reader.<sup>102</sup> These conditions shape what comes out of the encounter. Though I bring my body into this encounter, I also suspect that the drawing's placement above the shorts, roughly where a head might be had these shorts been right-side up and inhabited by a body, invites the interpretive leap

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<sup>101</sup> As I discuss in the Introduction, my critical approach is informed by what Françoise Lionnet describes as a noncoercive feminist reading practices: "to allow my self to be interwoven with the discursive strands of the text, to engage in a form of intercourse wherein I take my interpretive cues from the patterns that emerge as a result of this encounter—in other words, it is to enjoy an erotics of reading somewhat similar to Barthes's in *The Pleasures of the Text*" (28). What I signal in my encounter with Creuzet is how his artistic practices shapes my critical practice, but also how my particular set of (embodied) experiences of reading, writing, thinking and traveling and braided into the fabric that he offers me to play with.

<sup>102</sup> As Probyn will argue in *Writing Shame*, "Writing is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers. We study and write about society not as an abstraction but as composed of actual bodies in proximity to other bodies" (Probyn 76)

to the earlobe. I act on this assemblage of material forms as it acts one me; they become my external organs or I theirs.

The heterogeneous material elements of the sculpture contain a number of possible outcomes, and my corporeal engagement with it activates some, but not all, of them. *Cyan, d'une intensité (...)* thus renders tangible one of the key elements of Creuzet's poetics and process: placing individual forms into relation. The piece of wood, the pair of shorts, the drawing, the beads, the vase, each exist on their own. Individually, they function materially (hold flowers, hold a body), they function semantically (a gift necklace that reminds you of the giver, a piece of sea debris connotes wandering and exploration), the function aesthetically (they might catch an eye or not). But placed together, something else emerges from them that exceeds the individual stories and forms. The fact that they inhabit the same space contributes to this. However, the specific placing of each material form—how they are positioned in relation to each other—is just as important, so that a piece of driftwood connected to a short leg may evoke a shoe, because of its proximity to this particular piece of clothing.

In this sense, *Cyan, d'une intensité (...)* like most of Creuzet's oeuvres I would argue, share something profound with Bennett's theory of agency as not being located in the human, but being the result of the materiality of a potential "animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power," whether or not this cluster is recognized as acting together (23). Creuzet's heterogeneous clusters create effects, due to suggestive power of the material forms that are drawn into relations. The relations are ones of suspension (beads to driftwood), of completion (cyan to red), of expansion (vase to short leg), of elongation (oakwood to sweater sleeve), and more relations that escape my grasp. The possible associations—equivalence, opposition, analogy, repetition, etc.—that the objects provoke are less than infinite,

but many more than one.<sup>103</sup> In addition, most of these relations, I want to emphasize, are stubbornly tactile. Not only because the possible associations are the effects of the different material forms touching on each other, and not only because the textural difference between their materials is striking, but also because tactile relations produced the individual forms in the sculptures. For example, in the case of the driftwood, water and wind caressed the driftwood till its bark peeled away and its heartwood was sculpted into strange curves of a silky grain. The texture is the outcome of the tactile relation, and makes visible the potential past encounters just as it activates potential future encounters.

Because the relations shift and unfold in response to each other, these resolutely unruly relations invite us to draw isomorphic analogies—deep structural similarities despite differing surfaces—with sculptures in other exhibitions, in other locations. This is the case with *En sueur*, *vieux fatras*, the sweater-sculpture, which I propose has a rhyming relationship with *Cyan, d'une intensité (...)*. Though part of a separate exhibition, one that took place before *Corps sans tête*, elements from each of the two sculptures can be paired into a series of visual couplets. The central element of *En sueur*, the sweater, covers the top half of the body, while the central element of *Cyan* covers the bottom half. The two items share the same function, and *complement* each other, though they do not *complete* an outfit. Furthermore, one item of clothing is red and the other blue; cyan, specifically, its title tells us. Removing red light from white makes cyan appear and inversely, mixing red and cyan light, white appears: another complementary—but not totalizing—relationship. Why *cut-off* shorts, instead of regular, whole, shorts or pants? Are pants

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<sup>103</sup> “It’s easy to get juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity and start complimenting everything as such. Sedgwick was impatient with that kind of sloppy praise. Instead, she spent a lot of time talking and writing about that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity. This finitude is important. It makes possible the great mantra, the great invitation, of Sedgwick’s work, which is to ‘pluralize and specify.’ (Barthes: one must pluralize, refine, continuously’)” (Nelson 2016, 77-78).

without legs an echo of a *Corps sans tête*, a body without a head that is the title image of the other exhibition? Once again, these images fall into step without creating a perfect repetition, forming a visual rhyme. The visual couplets formed out of individual elements in these two sculptures thus invite us to bring into relation works that are not temporally or geographically co-present. Moreover, they create isomorphic analogies rather than a unified totality.

Through the term isomorphic analogies, I am echoing Françoise Lionnet, who speaks of one of the features of a nonessentialist postcolonial aesthetics being a mobilization of “isomorphic analogies over unified totalities” (14). She employs these terms, it appears, to *evoke* how a nonessential aesthetics would work, not to define or outline their meaning. Drawing from mathematical definitions of isomorphism, I take Lionnet’s “isomorphic analogies” to signal the mapping of a set of corresponding relationships between two separate entities. More specifically, a map of corresponding relationships in form and structure (rather than similarities in surface or appearance) that preserves the outcome of that particular set of relationships. Though the two entities are not equal, the parts of them that correspond to each other answer the same question—they contain the same information. An aesthetics that deploys isomorphic analogies, I thus argue, that builds connections by mapping, tracing, or drawing out similar structures within *parts* (of forms, concepts, images) rather than between wholes. It is such an aesthetics, I contend, that Creuzet’s use of fragments and textures practices.

### ***Ce vieux bout de bois: Opacity in the Aesthetics of Texture***

Perhaps, it may seem, we have strayed far away from discussing a sense of self. What does this pile of objects have to do with telling a story of being and belonging in diaspora? The poetic texts that Creuzet writes to complement his visual pieces complete the picture. For the *Jangal (...) mon dawa* exhibit, Creuzet co-writes an opening text with Emilie Renard, a curator, art critic, and not-infrequent collaborator with Creuzet. The text begins as a letter addressed to a

‘Julien,’ presumably Julien Creuzet. These opening lines allude to the many voyages ‘Julien’ has taken, over lands and seas starting with his birth in the Paris suburbs and his early departure to Martinique (just like Creuzet). The letter states, “De ces traversées, tu gardes le rythme des mouvements intérieurs, une façon de relier les choses entre elles, de passer entre ici et là-bas, entre toi et l’île ou la ville que tu habites, entre ta main et les objets que tu saisis” ([From these crossings, you maintain the rhythm of internal movements, a way of linking things to each other, of passing from here to there, from you to the island or the city where you live, from your hand to the objects it grasps]; Creuzet and Renard 2016). Movement between different geographies becomes a gesture of collecting; crossing a form of linking the objects of this collection together. That image of a hand grasping at an object—enclosing the object in the privacy of its palm—is an intimate one: it speaks to being moved by something, moved enough to move it with you.<sup>104</sup> In all of the journeys Creuzet takes, what does he reach out to, what does he hold on to?

The text then switches from second-person address ‘You, Julien’ to first-person singular. This invites us to read the ‘I’ as Creuzet’s authorial voice. This voice begins by describing a rubber tree, balata, that grows in Martinique and other tropical locations. ‘Balata,’ it turns out, is also the name of a regional reserve and botanic garden famous in Martinique. Balata, however, is also the name of a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank, established in 1950 and housing 27,000 people today. A few stanzas down, the poem reads:

Ils ont mis le feu au pavillon (Savare),  
pour faire fuir les migrants,  
sur la presque île,

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<sup>104</sup> This image, coincidentally, creates a visual symmetry with the promotional video for the *Galerie de dons* at the *Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration* (see Chapter 1). In this five-minute video created for the gallery’s installation, a few of the immigrant donors were interviewed with the object they donated to the museum, and during the interviews the camera frequently zooms in on the object which is fondled in the hands of the speaker. I am not suggesting Creuzet’s poem is a direct visual citation; what my reading practice aims to do is probe at the patterns that emerge when the human-material object relationship is mobilized in conversations around social belonging.



paraît-il ?  
Comment savoir,  
le pourquoi des braises chaudes ?

They set the (Savare) warehouse on fire,  
to chase the migrants out,  
on the meander,  
so I hear?  
How can we know  
the why of the warm embers?  
Creuzet and Renard 2016

These lines refer to an arson that happened on April 25, 2016, in the city of Caen in the north of France. Caen is an inland port city, connected to the English Channel by two rivers that merge at Caen. The merging rivers form a ‘presqu’île.’ This term refers to a body of land that is, literally, an almost-island, surrounded by water on most sides; the name in French comes from binding together “presque” which means ‘almost’ and ‘île’ which means ‘island.’ A presqu’île can jut out from the mainland into the sea, or it can be found inland, when a river splits, as in Caen.<sup>105</sup> The Savare warehouse mentioned in the poem is located on Caen’s presqu’île. Caen is not far from Calais, where in March 2016, the French police forces, on national orders, razed a migrant settlement where thousands of people lived while they waited for a chance to cross the English Channel into the UK. A couple dozen undocumented immigrants, having lost their shelter in Calais, had moved to Caen and were squatting in the Savare warehouse. This warehouse was set on fire in April, a month after the immigrant men and women moved in.

The poem thus places, one after the other, the island of Martinique, a refugee camp on the West Bank, and another migrant camp on an almost-island in France. The histories of the bodies of land, the political forces that spurred the waves of migration, the relationship between the

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<sup>105</sup> A similar geologic body, called a meander or méandre in French, is formed when a river snakes so tightly that it nearly cuts off a thin bend of land. I’ve translated “presqu’île” as “meander” instead of “peninsula” or “almost island” in part to come closer to the rhyme of “presqu’île / paraît-il” with “meander/hear,” and in part because the polysemic nature of “meander” comes closer as well to the polyvalent associations the “presqu’île” evokes.

people living on those lands and the land are distinct. The poem does not appear to be drawing analogies nor equivalencies between them, but their proximity makes them part of the same poetic body. In the next few lines of the poem, Creuzet evokes some of the quotidian, subtle moments of racism he experiences—no one sitting next to him on public transit, people assuming he’s in need of money. He says, “Je suis ce tas d’histoires, / sans incidence” [I am this heap of stories / to no end]. He suggests then, that he is all of these stories, but also appears to suggest that the stories are not necessarily relevant to each other: they are brought together as a *heap*, something messy and lacking coherence, significant only for its quantity not its quality. Though alluding to experiences of displacement—and resistance to—displacement, the poem does not draw neat equivalences between Creuzet, the refugees on the West Bank, the migrants in Caen, and the “they” that set fire to the warehouse. The different experiences and geographies are not mirror images of each other, nor are they polar opposites. The lack of neatness referred to by the choice of the word “tas” hints at the under-determined nature of the relationship between these stories; the poem proposes no obvious ending.

Instead, I would argue, these different stories function as *presqu’îles* in an archipelagic formation: separate bodies that are each geologic traces of a past seismic movement.<sup>106</sup> If the bodies of land that form an archipelago are separate in the present, their past might nevertheless be interwoven, occluded by the waters that cover their shared volcanic roots—or their shared continental shelf. If there are hints of a connected past, the future, on the other hand, remains open-ended. Continental shifts produced the conjoined separation, but future relationships, while conditioned by this past, cannot be predicted solely on its basis. Connections are invited when

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<sup>106</sup> Archipelagos generally fall in one of three categories, determined by their geologic origin. The volcanic activity of subduction zones in the middle of the ocean create “oceanic islands.” “Continental fragments,” meanwhile, are land masses that have separated from a continental mass due to tectonic displacement. Finally, “continental islands,” found next to a continental coast, are part of the same continental shelf, partially exposed.

Creuzet places them next to each other in his poem, but again, but each of the *presqu'îles* resists equivalence or assimilation. If the sculpture I discussed in previous sections invited a reading of material forms as folding into and onto each other, this poem appears to stress the ways in which that folding does not, nevertheless, efface historical, political, and geographic particularities—nor their unfinished entanglements.

The *resistance* to definition—the opacity of these relations—is all the more striking because of the closed syntax of this particular poem. While enjambment plays a significant role in some of Creuzet's other poetic texts, in this poem, the line breaks coincide perfectly with the grammatical breaks of his sentences. Even the question phrases line up neatly, the question marks often falling at the end of the stanza, and always at the end of a line. This syntactical wholeness, creating isolated, self-contained clauses and sentences, contrasts with the geographic enjambment of the content of the lines. It reads as if one thought does not have time to settle before being interrupted by another; the overpowering heat of Martinique's Balata Gardens still there lingering in the air when the poem switches abruptly to the cold Normandy spring in the warehouse in Caen. One location is jugged up against another, boundaries demarcated by the syntax but broken by the proximity of other locations: an island, almost.

What is it then, that the separate bodies of land evoked by the poem will share? What will become their common ground in the poem? In the next stanza of the poem, Creuzet once again brings together the human and nonhuman to illustrate how his particular embodied experience fits in a larger web of historic displacement and migration. Creuzet writes:

Je suis ce vieux bout de bois,  
acajou de Cuba,  
et bien que je sois dans ton ici,  
je suis d'une densité rare.

I am this old wood end,  
Cuban mahogany,

and even if I am in the place you call here,  
I have an unusual density.  
Creuzet and Renard 2016

Here, Creuzet (the narrative ‘I’) likens himself to wood from a tree native to Martinique and other Caribbean islands and parts of the Americas. This wood, Cuban mahogany, because of its density and even grain, was used for ship-building when the Spanish, British, and French empires claimed territories in the Caribbean and set up plantations. Soon, because of the wide diameter of the mahogany trees allowed for large, even boards to be cut, and because of its brilliant red color, mahogany became the wood of choice for high-quality furniture makers in the British colonies in North America, and soon in Europe as well. France and England, with their Caribbean colonies, could directly import this fashionable wood, while other European countries bought the imported wood from them. Today, Cuban mahogany is rare, having been overharvested during the peak of the mahogany trade.

This is a history, not unbrutal, that draws together disparate continents. In this sense, Cuban mahogany can be read as a “contact” object in the sense in which Mary Louise Pratt develops the term to “invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. [...] A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. [It stresses] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (5-6). This would be one—not unproductive—way to read the relation Creuzet sets in motion, through his poem, between his being and the piece of wood. By linking himself to this wood, Creuzet hearkens to the structures of movement that connected Africa, Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean for centuries, leaving none of the places unchanged, though some profited at the expense of the others. The contact perspective illustrated by the Cuban mahogany in Creuzet’s sculpture emphasizes the specificity of

Caribbean migration in Europe, conditioned by a history of colonial (over)exploitation, labor, trade, commerce and craft. The poem had opened placing several traumatic displacements (Caen, Balata) in cohabitation through Creuzet's poetic body, but here it maintains the particularities of the Caribbean experience alive.

At the same time, mahogany is not the only type of wood or tree parts that Creuzet incorporates into his sculptures. And in the poem, he mentions specifically the *density* of this particular wood. It appears, thus, that the power of the Cuban mahogany comes not simply from its contact history, but from its particular material qualities. What does the material quality of density do for Creuzet? How does holding on to the density of this wooden piece set another story in motion? It is certainly important enough that he repeats this word a little later in the poem, saying, "Je suis d'une densité rare, touffue" ([I have a thick unusual density]; Creuzet and Renard 2016). "Touffu" connotes thickness, but also a bushiness, as one may speak of a bushy brush, forest, or jungle. Though a *dense* wood describes a weight, and evenness to the grain, which speaks of texture, the choice of "touffu" heightens the textural connotation. If texture has, in other artworks, functioned as the trace of an interaction, here texture creates a barrier to it. In other words, if texture is an effect bodies acting on each other, it can also be a reaffirmation of a boundary between two bodies.

I would argue that the choice of mahogany wood, known for its density, and the repeated attention to this particular material quality in the poem opens a space for opacity. As discussed earlier in the chapter, a Glissantian poetics of relation honors opacities. By this, Glissant means acknowledging and making room for that which cannot be assimilated, that which cannot be limpidly translated, in the moment when "I" encounter an other "I." In one elegant phrase near the end of his book, Glissant declares, "Des opacités peuvent coexister, confluer, tramant des

tissus dont la véritable compréhension porterait sur la *texture* de cette trame et non pas sur la nature des composants”(204, emphasis mine; [Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not its individual components]; Wing 190). Glissant envisions opacities as coexisting threads that can weave a fabric. Or, weave a story, since “une trame” in French is both the weave of a textile and the plot of story.

I want to press on the idea that a true understanding of this process would tell us something about the *texture* of the weave (or plot), not about the *nature* of the threads that made it up, and how this relates to the embodied experience of diaspora and migration. This weave, or *tissage* in French, becomes the foundation of Françoise Lionnet’s understanding of *métissage* as an aesthetic concept, position, and strategy. Lionnet draws deeply from Glissant’s writings on *métissage* and pairs them with Nancy Morejón’s *mestizaje* to point to how telling the history, post-slavery, of cultural intermingling requires not a blending out but a braiding in of gender and race as well as culture and language. *Métissage*, because of its etymological roots in the Latin *mixus* which referred primarily to a cloth made of cotton and flax (or two different fibers), is for Lionnet a rich metaphor to describe the encounter between different cultures and the subsequent forms that emerge from it. As she notes, “it is a neutral term, with no animal or sexual implication” (14) and does not refer to a hierarchization as “mulatto” and other Anglophone terms do. At the same time, *métissage* does suggest the mixing of races as well as languages and cultures, something a world like “creolization” or “transculturation” does not necessarily capture.

In addition, as a homonym to the Greek *metis*, a cunning intelligence and form of “savoir-faire which resists symbolization within a coherent or homogenous conceptual system since it is also the power to undo the logic and clarity of concepts,” *métissage* links itself to the

arts of transformation and transmutation (16). Lionnet calls this an aesthetics of ruse that “rejoins the signifying practices familiar to all oppressed peoples, in particular to the descendants of slaves in the New World. Such practices had to be learned by the slaves as survival tactics within a hostile environment that keeps them subjugated, relegated them to the margins” (18). In that sense, *métissage* is a strategy à la de Certeau as discussed in Chapter Two, that allows a disenfranchised individual to work within structures of power for their own advantage. Lionnet deploys *métissage* as a practice of both reading and writing, attuned to “the relationship between historical context and individual circumstances, the sociocultural construction of race and gender and traditional genre theory, the cross-cultural linguistic mechanisms that allow a writer to generate polysemic meanings from deceptively simple or seemingly linear narrative techniques” (29). As a *visual* practice, I argue, *métissage* may be expressed through the deployment of texture and texturing. Texture, like *métissage*, functions as a polysemic gesture, linked to transformation, the aftermath of an act that has no stable positive or negative connotation, but that can become either. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, texture requires a mixing of the senses to be apprehended, but the relationship between the sensations may be surprising, or deceptive. Something may be soft but bitter, brittle and sweet, fuzzy yet rigid. In that sense texture shares the propensity to ruse that Lionnet highlights in *métissage*. In this final section, I will explore how an aesthetics of texture in Creuzet’s work, as a visual expression of *métissage*, allows him to reframe diaspora as a story not of departure and arrival but as a story of texturing.

### ***Writing Stories of Diaspora as Stories of Touch***

Why *texture*? Why is the story of *texturing* more important than the original components, or the final product? The last piece of art I want to bring into the conversation is a video-sculpture titled *Opéra Archipel, Cactus, le point en l’air* [Opera-Archipelago, Cactus, floating tip]. In this video, which runs just over two minutes, an arm, cropped just a couple inches below

the wrist, appears at the bottom of the screen. The fingers of the hand stretch out and up. Two plastic vases, one red and one black, balance precariously on these fingers.



Figure 28 Video still from *Cactus, le point en l'air*.

This hand is not a cactus. The fingers, I suppose, could be spines; they are long, slim, and pointy. The vases, perhaps the cactus pears; the black one is roughly the shape of this fruit, the red one roughly the right color. Though cactus pears don't typically grow on the spines, and these "pears" spring out of the finger-spines.

This video quivers. It is silent, but vibrant. The hand moves throughout the two minutes, dancing a precarious dance with the vases that cling to the tipping point. From time to time, spectacular rays of black and red light emerge from the glasses. (Cacti, by the way, are not known for shooting lasers.)



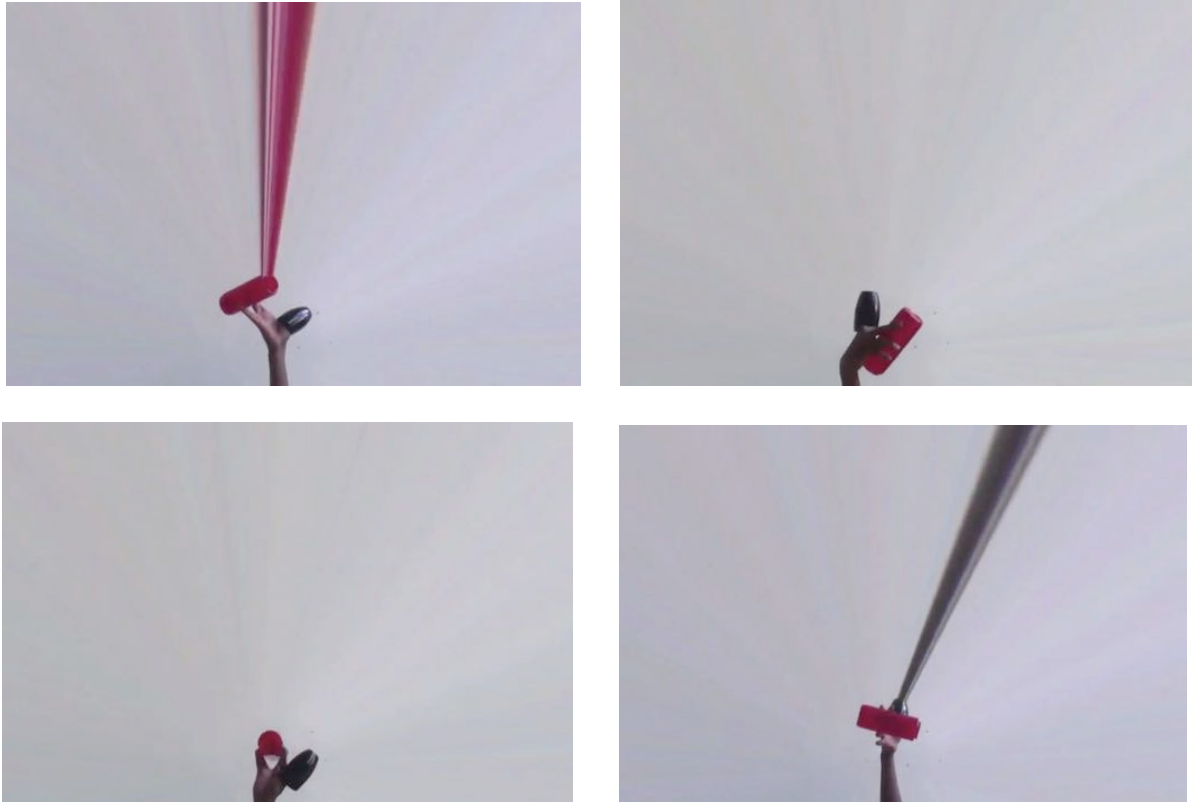


Figure 29 Video stills from *Cactus, le point en l'air*.

The hand rotates, dives down, nearly loses the red vase, resettles. At one minute into the video, we catch a glimpse of the shoulder to which the arm is attached. Other than this brief sighting, there are no signs of the body to which the arm belongs. This unmoored appendage is another “bout,” a bit or end of the self. There are few identifying marks on this limb; it is hard to tell the height or weight of the body to which this hand belongs, its age range, if it is a genetically male or female body. This video defamiliarizes the most mundane of human limbs; to know something like the back of your hand in this case would be to not know it at all. Indeed, I would argue that the video “capture[s] the *alien* quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very *radical* nature of the (fractious) kinship between the human and nonhuman” (Bennett 112). Detached from the body, entwined with the vases and light rays, this limb becomes its own heterogeneous cluster of materially differing forms, a human and non-human

collective that will produce effects (defamiliarization, surprise, unsettlement, perhaps rejection) on a viewer.

I have insisted so far that whatever this assemblage is, it is not a cactus. But, what if it were a cactus? What, in fact, is a cactus? A cactus is green. It grows in dry, hot places. A cactus stores water in its fleshy stem. A cactus, like Cuban mahogany, is native to the Americas, except for one species that grows on the African continent. A cactus has shallow roots that spread wide, not deep, like rhizomes, perhaps. Its roots are quick-forming, propagating whenever there is a rain fall to reach as much wet soil as possible: they are mobile, spreading wide in order to survive. A cactus has spines instead of leaves. Its spiny body is meant to ward off predators, though its spines also provide shade to keep the stem cool. It is not inviting to touch, but if you were to touch a cactus, you would probably wind up with broken skin, a textural trace of the cactus' spines touching you.

A tactile encounter can leave a textural trail. A tactile encounter is the touching of two or more bodies; the textural trail is the evidence of the tactile encounter, evidence that appears, *materially*, on the surface of the skin. Coincidentally, when reporting on the difficulties the *Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration* faced during its conception (see Chapter 1), one newspaper noted, “La tâche s'avère épineuse puisqu'il s'agit, en quelque sorte, de muséifier un phénomène vivant et visible” (Weill 2007 [The task, it turns out, is a thorny one as it requires, in a way, museumifying a living and visible phenomenon]).<sup>107</sup> As I argued earlier, migration is a tactile experience, very often a prickly one. It is a tactile experience literally in that it involves inhabiting a specific locality that involves sensorial interactions with other bodies and the

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<sup>107</sup> The appearance of the word “thorny/prickly” and the evocation in Creuzet’s video of a cactus’s spines are not direct citations or conscious intertextual references. However, they do form a “rhyming sequence” as discussed earlier (see footnote 98).

environment: living in a place might mean touching hot sidewalks or brushing against the sticky railing of a subway station or leaning against a leafy tree to catch a cool breeze on your sweaty skin. But the textural trail of the experience of migration is also a *metaphoric* one. A particular type of rainfall pelting heavily might trigger memories of a place one used to live; the smell of winter wetness on a bridge might be comforting or confusing. Tactile encounters in a locality exceed the (built or natural) material environment as well: they have social manifestations. One might be stopped-and-frisked on the way to work, or asked for the identity papers one does not carry in one's pocket, or patted on the shoulder for how well one speaks the host country's language. These are tactile encounters, too, and they leave marks, needle at and unstitch the skin, in a metaphoric sense.

So, what is, to riff on Bennett, the "particular degree and duration of power" embodied in the materially-differing tactile encounter (soft flesh, sharp spines) evoked by *Cactus, le point en l'air*? What thoughts, actions, and experiences can it set in motion? What models of being and belonging can unfold from it? *Cactus*, with its attention to the hand and fingers that pierce and cradle the plastic vases, hones in on the tactile encounter and its textural effects. And yet, it also creates a barrier to the tactile encounter. Unlike the previous artworks that I discussed, which were three-dimensional sculptures assembled from various material bodies, *Cactus* is a video, a two-dimensional image. Texture, as I mentioned earlier, though closely related to touch, is not *exclusively* apprehended through touch. A spectator of the video might perceive the texture of the smooth, hard vases against the fleshy contours of the hand and the ridges of the palm's skin, but touching the video screen will produce a dissonant feeling. Watching the video invites a cross-sensorial and imaginative engagement with the image, wherein the viewer is asked to see something they don't see (a cactus) and to feel a texture they cannot touch (neither the "real"

texture of the hand nor the metaphorical texture of the cactus, only the texture of the screen on which the video dances).

In that regard, the *Cactus* video *moves* the spectator in the sense that it pulls them into a different sensorial posture, one that is out-of-place with their temporal and geographical position.<sup>108</sup> But it also might *move* them in that it might create favorable conditions for empathy and imagination. Sedgwick, on the title of her collection of essays, explains the double meaning of touch: “The title I’ve chosen for these essays, *Touching Feeling*, records the intuition that a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions. But the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word ‘touching’; equally it’s internal to the word ‘feeling.’” (17). Similarly, to *move* someone is to ‘touch’ someone’s emotions, just as it is to change their spatial position. *Cactus* is a moving picture—that early term for film—not only in the sense that it is a series of images that move over time, but in that it invites the viewer to consider both the sensory and affective experience *of* movement, and to consider sensory and affective experience *as* movement.

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To return to the letter that opens the *Jangal (...) mon dawa* poem, the rhyme and reason of ‘Julien’s’ déplacements can be found “entre ta main et les objets que tu saisis” ([between you hand and the objects you grasp]) ‘there’ and ‘here.’ In other words, the story of displacement materialized through Creuzet’s artworks does *not* structure its plot around departure or arrival or

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<sup>108</sup> This is not unlike the Cape Coast Castle Memorial (Chapter Three) where the narrative of the guided tour invites the visitors into a cross-sensorial engagement with the material properties of the castle. This is an engagement that (troublingly) moves the visitors closer to the experience of slavery. In Chapter Three, I argued that this cross-sensorial identification with the enslaved men and women raised ethical questions about the appropriation of the experiences of historical exploited, racialized groups into a universal, “post-racial” narrative. However, I also noted how this very cross-sensorial engagement provided ways for the visitors to fracture and complicate the appropriation. This chapter considers a different mode of envisioning a collective belonging, in which the tactile encounter becomes a way of honoring and making room for fracture, while still generating favorable conditions for an empathetic encounter in the larger social body.

(imagined) return, plots which are future-oriented or past-oriented. Rather, it tells it through what ‘Julien’ holds, tenderly, firmly, in his hand in each place: “Ici aussi tu ramasses des coquillages, des bois flottés, tu tailles des shorts, tu graves des poèmes dans le bois, tu filmes et montes sur ton telephone ...” ([Here also you gather seashells, driftwood, you carve shorts, you engrave poems on wood, you film and edit on your phone ...]; translation mine). The image presented here is an active one, with Julien bending down towards seashells, using his hands to gather up pieces of wood, to carve, sculpt, type, write, create, discard. He acts out of the place where he finds himself, taking up what is within reach.

This departs from the prevailing metaphors, images, and plots of diaspora narratives in that it is present-oriented and the plot is not oriented around a departure point not an arrival point. Instead, plot is structured around two elements: the tactile encounter and its textural trace. Though it appears to be a simple template, the potential for differentiation is vast. Pressing, caressing, smothering, smoothing, piercing, scratching, tugging, jabbing, burnishing, buffing, palpating, penetrating, carving, cradling: all of these are tactile encounters, but the feeling of the touch is not the same. The levels of pleasure and the levels of pressure vary. Furthermore, the textural traces left by these touching gestures also vary. Some are more permanent than others, the size, depth, shape, and aspect of the trace differs, as the rosy lines of fingernail scratches will differ from the pillow marks left on a sleep-tinged cheek.

In addition, this image of reaching out and grasping muddies the active/passive pose. There is an element of chance, the objects happen upon Creuzet, he does not appear to be searching for them, they are part of the place where he is. But, he reaches out to these objects, willingly encounters them or is beckoned by them, and works them with his hands. Moreover, tactile relations with material bodies trouble a dualistic notion of agency, for as Sedgwick notes:

“the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object” (Sedgwick 14). To touch is to be touched.

Not to say that all tactile encounters take place on identical or level playing fields. Ahmed insists that we not overlook “how some forms of touch have been means of subjugating others, or of forming the other as a place of vulnerability and fear (colonial and sexual histories of touch as appropriation, violation, and possession)” (49). She usefully develops the idea of *economies of touch* to account for how touch is valued differently. What I find effective about deploying the tactile encounter, as Creuzet does, in a poetics of migration, is that the variations of kinds of touch and texture that I mentioned earlier allows for these distinctions to be made. In Creuzet’s poetics of migration, the meaning of the encounter can only be apprehended by looking at its textural effects. It is broad enough to encompass a number of different trajectories, but it’s value, its potential, cannot be determined before its specific course takes place. Neither can it be determined by the origin point, destination, or endpoint of the trajectory.

In this chapter, I have argued that Creuzet oeuvre presents the story of migration through the lens of the tactile encounter and its textural trace. This is, of course, only one person—or artistic persona’s—way of telling the story. The geographic movements he undertakes are marked by privilege in that he has a right to residency in France as a citizen, even if he is socially othered as a black man, as an Afro-Caribbean, and as a non-mainlander—the textural variations of his story. I am not suggesting that we consider the poetics of Creuzet’s diaspora narrative as a sort of model or ideal narrative to be adopted. Rather, I suggest that his practice of creating materially-informed metaphors makes them “internally discontinuous, allowing for difference

and inequalities between situated subjects” (Tinsley 204). I suspect that the textural variations Creuzet’s poetics and process offer up participate in creating the conditions of empathy and imagination in the encounters that follow migration. These conditions of empathy and imagination are needed to account for the myriad of unique experiences of displacement, estrangement, and movement that we clumsily try to address in the all-encompassing terms of ‘diaspora’ or ‘migration’—and also in ‘nation’ and ‘home.’ The metaphor of the tactile encounter, and the textural variations of a skinned boundary, provocatively materialized in Julien Creuzet’s oeuvre, is one of the metaphors that, as a concept and a strategy, might favor the imagination and empathy needed to provide more inclusive ways of being-at-home in the cross-section of national identity and diasporic consciousness.

## Conclusion: Resting and Restless Places

In the last chapter of this dissertation, I argued that Martinican artist Julien Creuzet's deployment of everyday, personal belongings in his artistic practice materializes a way of putting parts of differing wholes in relation to each other. It also materializes the textural transformations of this encounter between parts. I place Creuzet's practice in dialogue with Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation—particularly Glissant's definitions of opacity and encounter—to ask what kind of diasporic ethics and aesthetics is enabled via Creuzet's work. At stake is developing a metaphor for the transformations, individual and collective, that happen in the process of co-habitation and movement across geographies. This final chapter ricochets back to the first chapter, that had asked how the personal belongings donated by immigrants at France's National Museum of the History of Immigration (MNHI) enable narratives of belonging to the French nation that challenge the model of citizenship that the state imposes on its immigrant subjects—and indeed, challenge the very understanding of narrative agency.

The second chapter picked up on the exploration of material agency in narratives, arguing that the personal belongings in the novels *Kétala* and *Becoming Abigail* work against the heteronormative expectations of a diasporic notion of belonging. It furthermore demonstrated how the two novels employ an assemblagic notion of subjectivity, in which the ability to elicit readerly empathy is produced through the interaction of the shared materiality of human and nonhuman bodies. The third chapter continues to probe at the aesthetics of empathy, particularly in narratives that reckon with the ongoing effects of transatlantic slavery and European



colonialism in the African continent. By comparing Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B* and the Cape Coast Castle slavery memorial site, the chapter argues that commemorative sites and artistic representations that seek to bring such traumatic histories into the present must move away from mimetic strategies based on seeing power, and towards aesthetic strategies that emphasize the multisensorial qualities of material environments and their objects. Taken together, the four chapters, through their own assemblage of material objects, narratives, sites, and people, make a case for braiding the critical practices of museology, narrative theory, and object-oriented criticism into the study of race and diaspora in the Francophone world.

Studies of race and diaspora will inevitably intersect with concerns of migration, national identity, and gender, and the historical processes that informed them. This dissertation has sought to keep a finger on the pulse of these specificities, while also suggesting ways in which creative and critical practices can imagine forms of co-habitation, solidarity, and inclusivity in an unevenly-resourced, historically-conditioned postcolonial world. What is at stake, in other words, is finding ways to tell stories of being-at-home that reduce rather than reproduce the inequalities of our predominant modes of producing knowledge and forming collective identities. There is no one metaphor to speak of an experience of being and belonging, no one narrative with a perfectly pitched plot that will account for the starkly varying experiences of being-at-home and failing to feel at-home. Metaphors, narratives, plots, and other rhetorical and aesthetic devices, nevertheless, *move* us. And if they move us, they might move us into a position of empathy and imagination that is more likely to make being-at-home a state that is always in the making, responding to the material bodies that inhabit it, rather than defined by multiple exclusions of race, gender, sexuality, and culture.

What happens, then, if instead of analyzing the stories of migration and diaspora that I have collected in this dissertation as examples of narratives of displacement, we analyzed them as narratives of *being-at-home*? As Wendy Walters suggests, “By redefining the word *home*, we can retain its power as a desire, yet lose its bounded and exclusionary nature. Perhaps we can think of a coalitional, processual ‘resting place,’ temporary and nomadic, that black writers create through fiction” (xxiv). The relationships between people, sites, and material objects that I have traced in these pages have pointed to the desire and creation not of (desti)Nations to which one can arrive or return. But rather, of the desire for such resting places, detours on a journey in-process that can be held on to, returned to, or shared with others. These resting places can map out a geography of belonging that allows for both movement and dwelling, that shows how nation and diaspora are co-constitutive rather than opposite ends of a binary; that emplacement and locality are part of the narratives of diaspora, just as mobility and unsettledness are part of the narratives of the nation.

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If this conclusion is a resting place—where I lay down the various bodies and voices that have nourished its pages—I want to keep it nevertheless *restless*. The desire for resting that I just described is matched by an equal desire to revisit, reroute, reach out. From this resting place, I can reflect on what materiality can offer further explorations of being and belonging in black and African Francophone creative expression and critical work. In other words, from this resting place I nevertheless yearn to see what ground this dissertation has yet to cover; I will gesture, then, toward two territories on its horizons.

One, is furthering an understanding of what a queer optics can do in diaspora studies. This dissertation, particularly in Chapter Two, has demonstrated that the desire for home in

experiences of displacement can be routed through queer geographies that (1) excavate local histories of gender and sexuality that are not captured in the colonial constructs of human intimacy and (2) imagine practices of kinship that are not bounded by a genealogical understanding. This only begins to scratch the surface of what emerges when queer and diaspora studies are put into conversation. As Gayatri Gopinath suggests, queer diaspora studies as a critical and creative practice shifts not only the geographic orientations of nation and diaspora—to include the migrations linked with settler colonialism and diasporas within nation-state boundaries, for example—but the temporal orientation of diaspora. “Queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora,” Gopinath argues, bringing clandestine counter-memories into the present that undercut the normative scripts of dominant ideologies of nation and diaspora (3). These counter-memories are forward rather than backward-looking in that they are wedded to a speculative practice of archival *imagination* rather than reconstruction, investing in that *what could have been* rather than the what happened.

This is the kind of epistemological investment that scholars such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008, 2010; 2012), Christina Sharpe, Jacqui M. Alexander, Frieda Ekotto, Jafari S. Allen, and Saidiya Hartman propose. In different ways, these writers argue that black personhood—especially stories of gender, desire, sexuality and even more particularly black women's experiences of gender, desire and sexuality—cannot be found by reading the (literary, historical, or anthropological) archive, even when one reads against the grain.<sup>109</sup> The sources that nourish speculative readings of blackness and queerness, in and out of diasporic formations, are necessarily fleeting, often non-visible, and must be apprehended through ripples, wrinkles, and goosebumps. It is an epistemological investment that continues in *Unsettled Belonging's*

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<sup>109</sup> See Allen and Tinsley (251) and Diabaté for particularly insightful discussions of imagination, epistemology, and the experiences of black women's sexuality.

attention to multisensorial and embodied processes of making meaning that may be particularly crucial for understanding the experience of blackness and diaspora (see Alexander pp. 307-308; see also Mbembe p. 18).<sup>110</sup>

Another terrain that emerges from this dissertation's restless resting place and is adjacent to the queering of diaspora, is a planetary concern. It is said that we are living in the age of the Anthropocene, in which human society acts as geologic force, sparking change on a planetary scale. An attention to ecological impact of humans runs through much of the work of the nonhuman turn—and certainly in Jane Bennett's analysis that has been so influential in my work. I have not made space for planetary concerns in this dissertation, but I do think where the dissertation ends seeps over the threshold for a planetary concern. Moreover, I would argue that even when studying environmental changes on a planetary scale, scholars must seek to understand how the experiences of the environment are lived on local levels, cut through with experiences of race and gender and African postcoloniality.

Indeed, I would contend that there was always already a planetary sensibility in the work of Édouard Glissant. His poetics of relation is deeply embedded in a geologic thinking, as the material constitution of an archipelago informs his understanding of blackness and diaspora.<sup>111</sup> If Glissant foreshadowed certain moves that have become key to planetary thinking, Achille Mbembe has argued that theory from and about African must engage with what he calls the “planetary turn of the African predicament,” contending that “our planet's destiny will be played

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<sup>110</sup> “The search for alternative acts of thinking requires the exploration of other ways of speaking; of the visual, of sounds, of the senses, and thinking as philosophically and historically as possible about the precariousness of life in Africa, the intensive surfaces of power and the various ways in which events coexist with accidents. Indeed, if the project is to “rethink Africa”, or, for that matter, to write the world from Africa or to write Africa into contemporary social theory, then there is no better starting point than the question of time. Time is neither uniform, nor homogeneous. Structures of temporality in colonial and postcolonial conditions are thoroughly entangled with the vicissitudes of the affective, with the subjective play of desire and uncertainty”

<sup>111</sup> Glissant furthermore meditates on Martinique's black sand beaches to understand the island's politics as both local and global, exemplifying the kind of scalar analysis that studies of the Anthropocene encourage.

out to a large extent in Africa” (1). To produce salient knowledge, theory must account for the multiple entanglements of humans, technologies, materialities, and environment. Mbembe thus suggests:

If the planet and the human constitute themselves through relations between multiple forces, then attempting to simply re-impose an expanded version of human subjectivity to all forms and forces will not suffice. ‘Desegregating’ and dis-enclaving theory must become a constitutive part of the new agenda. In this regard, the planetary library will of necessity be a theory of the interface. [...] The planetary library project rests on the assumption of the inseparability of the different archives of the world – Édouard Glissant’s *le Tout Monde*. Instead of holding them apart, it will recognize them as assets shared with all humans, non-human actors and self-sustaining systems. It will draw upon each of them while drawing them together. 30

The African continent and African experience become for Glissant the privileged spaces through which such theory of the threshold can be formed, contra prevalent perceptions that would put the global North as the cause and thus the site through which the Anthropocene must be interrogated.

The planetary sensibility is not only about juggling multiple geographic scales, but temporal ones as well. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, “the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (1). Thinking of human agency over multiple scales, for Chakrabarty, includes holding three aspects of the human condition in mind: the human as a universal subject in their shared capacity to hold and exercise rights, a legacy of Enlightenment thinking; the human as both profoundly same and profoundly different, marked by class, history, sexuality, race, etc that gets expressed and encoded according to both local and global forces; and the human as a biological species whose collective mode of living impacts the planet and puts the human species at risk of extinction. Anthropocene thinking tends to foreground the last definition of the human. However, Chakrabarty argues that *all three* aspects

of the human condition must be addressed simultaneously, despite their apparent temporal disjunctures and discontinuities.<sup>112</sup>

The modes of inquiry proposed by Mbembe and Chakrabarty, I contend, sketch out the terrain for a scalar and disjunctive method of inquiry, one that looks at human experience in nonhuman systems while holding in place deeply local embodiments of race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, etc. It resonates with my statement in the Introduction, where I noted that despite an engagement with the nonhuman turn, questions of human experience and human justice remained at the core of *Unsettled Belongings*. This is also the kind of work being done by scholars like Vanessa Agard-Jones, who does not claim the posthuman but rather the *posthumanities*. Agard-Jones writes: “I am inspired here by feminist technoscience studies and by efforts to theorize a “posthumanities” that breaks down boundaries both between academic disciplines and between bodies and their surroundings” (342). Her elegant work braids together literary expression, medical anthropology, and environmental history to write deeply local and profoundly embodied understandings of blackness, queerness, and the body in the French Caribbean, toggling between particular lives and global histories in ways that challenge the predominant meanings and metaphors of these signifiers.

I am drawn to Agard-Jones work because in thinking about the planetary, race, and sexuality in the context of French colonialism and African slave trade, the materialities of the metaphors she deploys lead to particular modes of making meaning. In her study of queer sexualities in Martinique, she explains:

Nearly everywhere on earth, sand is principally made up of one element—in some places silica, in others limestone. Ninety percent of a grain is almost always

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<sup>112</sup> They also bear being put into dialogue, as Zoe Todd argues in “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on The Ontological Turn,” with indigenous forms of knowledge production based in more-than-human, platenary epistemologies that have been taking place alongside the ones in the academy without being acknowledged.

just one of those two elements. But the other 10 percent is the percentage with a difference — the percentage that, in its difference, matters — the percentage that can tell us something about the history of a place. [...] While the sand's referents are far from concrete, they provide a model for one way to understand the memory of same-sex desire and gender transgression on the island — as diffuse yet somehow omnipresent. “Queerness,” then, retains a kind of oblique permanence in Martinique that has resonance both in the structure of the sand and in the connections made on the island's shores. Rather than invoke ideas about absence and invisibility as the condition of same-sex desiring and gender-transgressing people, turning to sand as a metaphor for the repository of memory may help our analyses engage with more fine-grained and ephemeral presences than our usual archives would allow. 340

Sand, in her essay, allows her to hold together a place (St. Pierre), a referent in the French colonial imaginary (as the Sodom of the Antilles), a geologic occurrence and its social consequence (the eruption of Mount Pele and destruction of the city), a local site of queer transgression (the beach in St. Anne), and a persistent presence in unexpected places (“carried on the wind and on our bodies. [Sand] ends up on the kitchen floor, in the backseat of the car, in the bottom of my handbag, and in all manner of bodily orifices” [340]). The material qualities of sand serve as a tactile archive, a repository of human memory, and a method of scholarly inquiry that hold the disjunctures of human and planetary agency in a productive tension.

I want to close *Unsettled Belongings* by placing it at the threshold of these scholarly terrains—queer diaspora studies and postcolonial planetary theory—letting it be a meeting point from which the preceding pages can be read again—or rewritten. It speak, I hope, to what has been the goal of these pages: not to “settle” the unsettled belongings of its title, but to allow unsettledness to participate in what it means to belong.

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