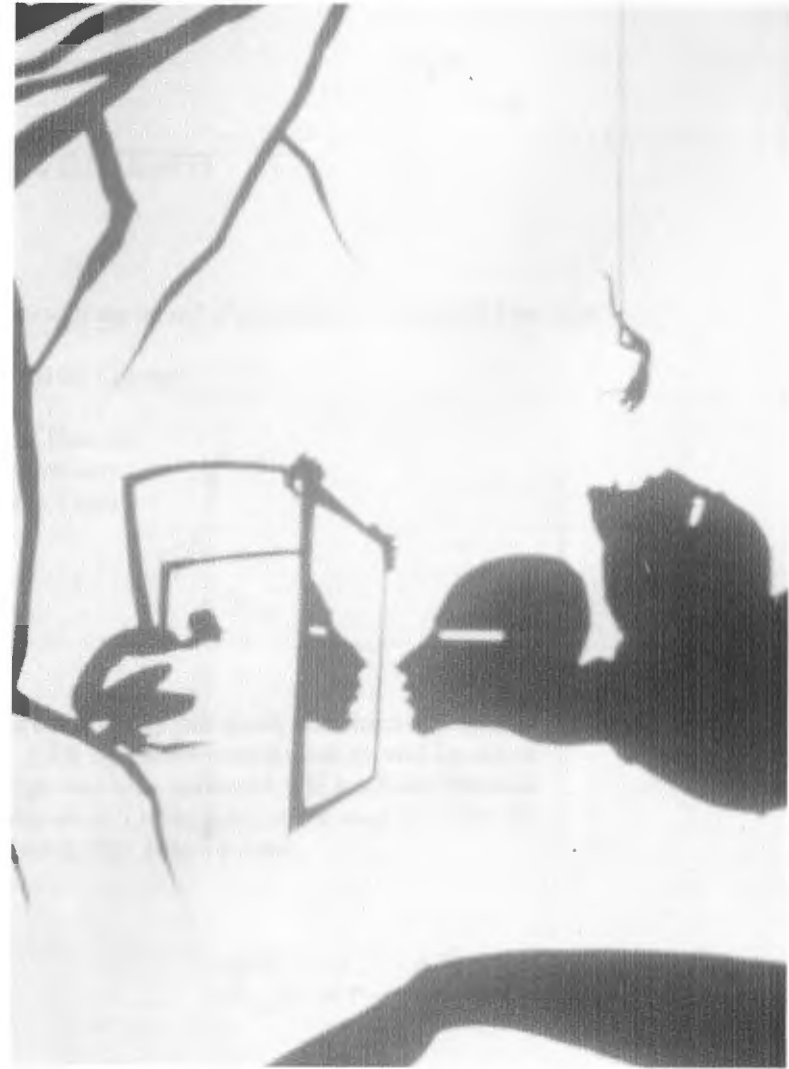


Kevin Taylor McCauley

the cosmic tantrum



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Kevin Taylor McCauley

The Cosmic Tantrum

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Supervisor: Professor Gavin Younge

Michaelis School of Fine Art
Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2001

Declaration

I, Kevin Taylor McCauley, do hereby declare that this work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced. I empower the University of Cape Town to reproduce for the purposes of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my dissertation entitled, *The Cosmic Tantrum*.

Signed by candidate

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15/2/02

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Abstract

This dissertation, entitled *The Cosmic Tantrum*, is presented in two parts: the body of creative work, in the form of a series of art works created over the course of two years of study, and the theoretical work discussed in this document.

The creative work is subdivided into two sections: 1) a series of ten figurative mixed-media paintings, organised chronologically; and 2) the lightworks, a suite of fourteen back-lit canvas tapestries entitled *The Eternal Carnival*. *The Eternal Carnival* is the centrepiece of my postgraduate work. A set of drawings is also presented as supporting documentation of the artistic process.

The theoretical component is the result of two years of research in Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Studies, and scholarship on the artistic and philosophical systems of what is known as the Black Atlantic. I provide an explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of the creative work in the form of a possible theory of culture, which I have called an “insurgent ancestral aesthetic”, elaborated in Part One. This theory of culture provides an analytical framework and leads into Part Two, in which I offer an exposition of the artwork.

As a theory, an insurgent ancestral aesthetic begins with the assertion that the presence of the artistic philosophies of the African Diaspora can be understood as essential to both Postmodern Theory and contemporary global culture. A comparative study of the relationship between Black Atlantic aesthetic philosophy and Postmodernism develops this theory of culture and leads into a discussion of possible applications of an insurgent ancestral aesthetic.

The themes and concepts of the theoretical research are played out in the creative work in various ways; I employ aspects of my work in theory to illuminate the art in Part Two. Generally, in the artwork, an improvisational approach to the human form reveals an image of the body as an expression of emotional, psychological, and spiritual content. The paintings generate a sense of the body as a story written over time, a record of all that has befallen it. *The Eternal Carnival* is the culmination of my work in shadow and silhouette and employs a narrative approach in signifying upon various spiritual characters and artistic principles active in the aesthetic and philosophic systems of the Black Atlantic.

For Maya Deren's living presence,

And Bob Thompson

For listening to the world and hearing well,

And for Mark

Wherever he and his joy may be.

Acknowledgments

I first thank my supervisor, Professor Gavin Younge, for his patience, support, and advice. He and many others within and outside the Michaelis School of Art continue to provide insight, critique, and encouragement.

Lynne Lomofsky has consistently offered sound criticism and an affectionate enthusiasm for my work; I thank her specifically for recognising the moment I arrived at the form of the final work. Koeka Stander's equally strong belief in my art and her seemingly limitless sense of possibility mean that she is always imagining new and exciting ideas for future work. Lizza Littlewort and I laughed and struggled together through an important period of work in painting; her insights not only into art, but also into life in general, will have a lasting impact on me. The many long and compelling conversations I have shared with Siphon Hlati have been of such value that I cannot imagine what this dissertation would be without the force of his calm wisdom.

Martin Hall's enthusiasm for the shadow works was inspiring and his technical assistance greatly appreciated; I especially thank him for his insights into the underlying, personal levels of my work.

Margaret McBain employed her incredible sewing skills and what must have been a great deal of patience in preparing the tapestries for *The Eternal Carnival*, which would not exist without her efforts.

My parents have enabled the entirety of my postgraduate work by assisting me with all manner of details involved in studying in a foreign country; in particular, my mother, Vivian Taylor, has been like a personal secretary working on my behalf from half a world away. I thank her, Terry McCauley, Barbara Pettus, and Jeff Rodgers for making everything possible.

Julia Tiffin has been available to me as a colleague and a friend without fail. Her relentless imagination and adamant faith furnished one of my best reservoirs of criticism and strength. She also provided all of the photographic expertise for the entire two years. I am deeply grateful.

Above all, I extend my deepest gratitude to Kevin McBain, whose mastery of all things electrical insures that the shadows will be seen. In all of two years of work, he has been the most important source of love, as well as light.

PROLOGUE

The Cosmic Tantrum

Our Mistress slips under your feet at the edge of an ocean that breathes forth unfathomed histories of wonder and suffering. Her many names are songs sung to us from beneath the dark waters, from within the shadows of the inverted world on the other side of our mirror reflection. She is the voice of our memory, the vast arc of a sweeping sea across which pass countless vessels, countless bodies rejoicing in their lives and singing to us their sad, sad stories.

Her love for us is whole. She comes to us offering joyful compassion and a limitless affection. She offers the consolations of one who understands, because She has, countless times, known the pains of a human life lived. She teaches us always the ways of beauty and gentility and grace.

But from love and the desire to be loved rises the inevitability of loss. Her divine love for humanity is a gaping vulnerability. It is doomed to failure in the physical world and so She is forever consumed by an infinite sadness. Her need to be adored is so vast as to never be fulfilled in our world of the incomplete and the living, and so She is thrown against Her most treasured hopes into an outrageous tantrum in which She epitomizes the pain and loneliness of the universe in howling sobs and clenches Her fists until the long manicured nails draw blood.

Her tears are the rage of forgotten history, the living memory of the wrongs of the past, the body of the suffering of hundreds of thousands of years, and the crying of a child who screams and shouts because we will not let Her have Her way: that the world should be perfectly just, unflinchingly true, and lastingly beautiful.

INTRODUCTION

Theory and Practice, Art and Activism



Theory and Practice

Where art theorists are, in the interests of their discipline, compelled to obscure the obvious distance between their words and the objects of their inquiry, artists are likewise obliged to reacquaint us with a truth that is always apparent: talking about art reenacts precisely that painful displacement between the world and the experience of the world that art – repeatedly, relentlessly – struggles to heal.

The problem that arises from the distance between theory and practice, played out in different ways in every arena of human culture and society, is the uncomfortable heart and homeland of my work as an artist. I experience theory – a suspect exercise in which the artist is regularly expected to engage – as both an illuminating pleasure and a specific limitation on the success of the material practice of art making. It is both a debilitating forethought and a clarifying afterthought. My artwork is inaugurated in gestural improvisation and so most of the mental operations that constitute theorising – analysis, observation, scrutiny, self-consciousness, questioning – stand in direct opposition to the free play of imagination. Many of the traditional values of rational thought which are generally regarded as the building blocks of a strong theoretical practice – accuracy, discernment, caution,

deconstruction, a critical positioning of the self outside of the object of inquiry – intervene as real, felt hindrances on my art-making process.

Nonetheless, theory remains crucial to my art. I experience the ongoing contestation between art and theory as a productive force played out around a central question: can the practice of making art be a socially responsible act? Any satisfactory answer to this question requires far more than blind faith. It requires that my practice as an artist be questioned, analysed, critiqued: theorised. My artwork explores this question as it emerges from a dialogue between differing but interrelated forms of expression: drawing, painting, sculpture, and theory.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 6

Art and Activism

The two poles of art and activism cordon off the space in which my artistic process proceeds. Because I was raised to value the twin ideals of creativity and social justice, the story of my work as an artist can be effectively told according to the logic of a set of difficult moral questions: can art be a form of activism? Is there a possibility of an art practice that is demonstrably socially responsible? In a world characterised by radical inequality and injustice, as Olu Oguibe succinctly puts it, 'by what right then do people practice art under such clearly traumatic conditions?' (Oguibe 1997:8). If art is effective as a positive force for social change, how does it succeed in being so? Where can a commitment to social activism fit within a professional art practice? Finally, are these concerns with creativity and justice of different worlds altogether, as classical modernism might reason, and are these questions thus rendered irrelevant?

If one is to determine whether art is a socially responsible act, one must first find a workable expression, a theory of how art is socially active. My postgraduate work has thus focused on arriving at a functional resolution to questions concerning the relationships between theory and art and between art and activism. Although both modernism and postmodernism provide many

theories on the social efficacy of art, for me this dilemma resolves itself within a long and exciting relationship with the artistic practices and philosophies of the African Diaspora. I have engaged in a relationship with these wisdom traditions¹ by way of readings of scholarly material on the cultural forms of the African Diaspora, Africanist and Post-Colonial Theory, popular culture, the visual arts, music, literature, poetry and politics. I have done so at home in the United States as well as in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Europe, and other places. Moving toward resolution on these issues has required the formulation – the careful and conscious creation – of a personal worldview, an aesthetic that organically integrates the two concerns of beauty and morality.

This project – the formulation of a personal cultural politic in which my artwork and the theorising of it interact to produce compelling and enlightening content – is deliberately playful and risky. I am purposefully testing the boundaries of academic soundness by placing the art and the theoretical explanation of it on equal footing, as equal constituents in a creative matrix. It is my hope that the paintings, sculpture, and theory may be considered as creative works in dialogue with one another.

¹ The term "wisdom tradition" will be used frequently in the pages of this dissertation and is specifically defined below.

I will note here that I am not formally trained in Postmodern or Post-colonial Theory, or in the history or theory of the African Diaspora. Important absences in my reading and research remain to be addressed in future projects. I do however claim to benefit and draw inspiration from a real, compelling and felt identification – an intuitive common sense I share – with the artistic impulses and rich aesthetic philosophies that continue to animate, expand, and improvise upon the innumerable creativities of the African Diaspora. It is in this spirit that, in the theoretical portion of this dissertation, I make a series of propositions concerning the role and character of cultural theory, the nature of the presence of things African in contemporary global culture, and the possibility of a theory of culture that roots itself in the elemental principles of Diasporic art and philosophy.

This dissertation is divided into two main sections. Part One presents the theoretical research in the form of a proposal of a cultural theory of the global. This project stands in its own right as one of the works of my dissertation, but also provides the framework for the exposition of my creative work. Part Two applies aspects of the theoretical research to my artwork, unifying the art with the theory.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 10

Perspectives and Terms

My research draws primarily upon Cultural Studies and art historical scholarship on the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora. This body of thought and research – driven forward by a growing array of scholars and artist/researchers – has, in the last thirty years or so, expanded into an important field of intellectual inquiry; it has revealed to the “public” academic eye a history rooted in Africa and disbursed via all manner of inter- and intra-national pathways throughout global culture. This web of intercultural production constitutes one of the world’s great systems of creative thought. It is a system so mind-bendingly complex and varied in its forms – incorporating theory, religion and spirituality, the visual arts, music, poetry, literature, dance, theatre, and all of these forms’ interweavings – and covers so many geographic and cultural territories, that terminology is problematic and generalisations are always open to a wide range of credible critiques.²

² In this vein Henry and Margaret Drewal, two important academics in the field of African Diaspora studies, warn us that, while theorists have been able to identify general patterns and principles at work across wide cultural systems, ‘generalisations about Yoruba religious belief are risky.’ See D. H. Brown, ‘Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts’, in A. Lindsay, ed. *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1996:77-146).

In scholarship on cultural systems descended from Africa, the terms “African Diaspora” and “Black Atlantic” are used in various ways. Following Paul Gilroy (1993) I use the term “Black Atlantic” to describe the cultures and cultural forms that have developed in the trans- and inter-cultural engagements between Africa, South America, North America, Afro-America and Europe. I use the term “African Diaspora” to designate a wider view. That term refers not only to the arts, cultures, and philosophies specific to the Black Atlantic and the geographic territory called “Africa”, but also to the wider presence of Africa-as-principle globally: in theory, in contemporary art, in the proliferation of the beat-driven musics (such as Jazz and Blues) throughout contemporary music, and in the transference of Hip Hop remix practice into advertising strategies or Japanese pop music. Where I reference the concept of diaspora generally without specific reference to the African Diaspora – as in the Jewish Diaspora, the Korean Diaspora, or Queer identities – the word is not capitalised.

Research in the arts and philosophies of the African Diaspora necessarily means an engagement with the languages of West and Central Africa and with the transformation of African terminologies and concepts in their “New World” encounters with Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English. Robert Farris Thompson’s monumental research and writing has been an

important influence on my own work so I employ his spelling and usage as a general rule. Where I am discussing the various manifestations of African words and concepts in the “New World”, I employ the Spanish/Cuban formulations because of their proximity to my own experiences as a United States citizen. In other cases, as in discussions of Haitian Vodoun, heavily informed by French colonial history, I cite specific sources, primarily Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* (1953).

In terms of the African sources of words and concepts, the Yoruba language and culture complex – centred in present-day Nigeria but forming its own diaspora – is widely acknowledged in scholarship on the subject as one of the most important presences in the Black Atlantic³. Referring to the Yoruba, an important early scholar of the African Diaspora, William Bascom, is quoted: ‘No other African people had such an important influence on the New World,’ (Bascom in Lawal 1996:3). Scholarly writing very often relies on Yoruba philosophy and language – an infinitely rich source of wisdom and analytical material – as a way of generalising

³ It is widely agreed that the Yoruba constituted roughly one quarter of the population transported to the “New World” via the Slave Trade. Furthermore, theory and art from the Yoruba Diaspora maintain a crucial presence in global culture today, especially in the visual arts and literature. See R. Abiodun, H. Drewal, & J. Pemberton, eds., *The Yoruba Artist* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1994).

Diasporic concepts and principles. My dissertation follows that convention.⁴

A few other terms require some notation. I make frequent use of the term “wisdom tradition”. My broad usage of this term is deliberate, intended to communicate a sense of the vast sweep of the global complexes I discuss in this study. By wisdom tradition I mean a complex of interwoven cultural forms, aesthetic projects, art objects, intellectual concepts, philosophic principles, and spiritual beliefs that has transmitted inherited knowledge across geographic and temporal spaces; such complexes are characterised by tremendous differentiation but unified by essential beliefs, intuitions, and sensibilities. Numbered among these wisdom traditions are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and – the academic verdict is now in – the ancestral spiritualities of the African Diaspora.

The term “ancestral spirituality” is an equally broad term, and I use it liberally here. My intentional implication that the systems of knowledge of the African Diaspora can legitimately be named and studied under the rubric of the “ancestral” is a

⁴ It must be noted here, however, that many “ethnic” or cultural groups maintain important presences in the Western Hemisphere and Europe; for example, Thompson devotes a large portion of his major work, *Face of the Gods* (Munich: Prestel, and The Museum for African Art, New York. 1993) to the powerful presence of Kongo culture.

contentious one that I have not argued here. That argument will entail a lengthy, though worthy project. Nonetheless, I use the term to describe the wide body of spiritual traditions of African descent (and their attendant arts and philosophies) centred on the formalised practice of engaging with the variegated presences of the dead as the embodiments of collective memory and the mediators of the relationship between humanity and divinity. There are of course many other traditions that venerate ancestors. In the space of this dissertation, I refer specifically to those descended from African creativities.⁵

I make frequent reference to “the global”. The theoretical aspect of this dissertation deals with certain fractal patterns of human creativity and interaction that can be identified as global systems.⁶ It presumes, along with many other theorists and writers, the suspect notion that this can be achieved at all and proceeds from the acceptance that this brand of theorising is necessarily open to critique and deeply subjective. My usage of “the global” refers to

⁵ What I am calling “ancestral spiritualities” Gerardo Mosquera names ‘religious-cultural complexes of African origin.’ I make occasional use of Babatunde Lawal’s term, ‘New World Africanisms’; both in A. Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1996).

⁶ Both Appadurai and Gilroy employ the fractal as a central metaphor in their writings on global systems. See A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1996) and P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso. 1993).

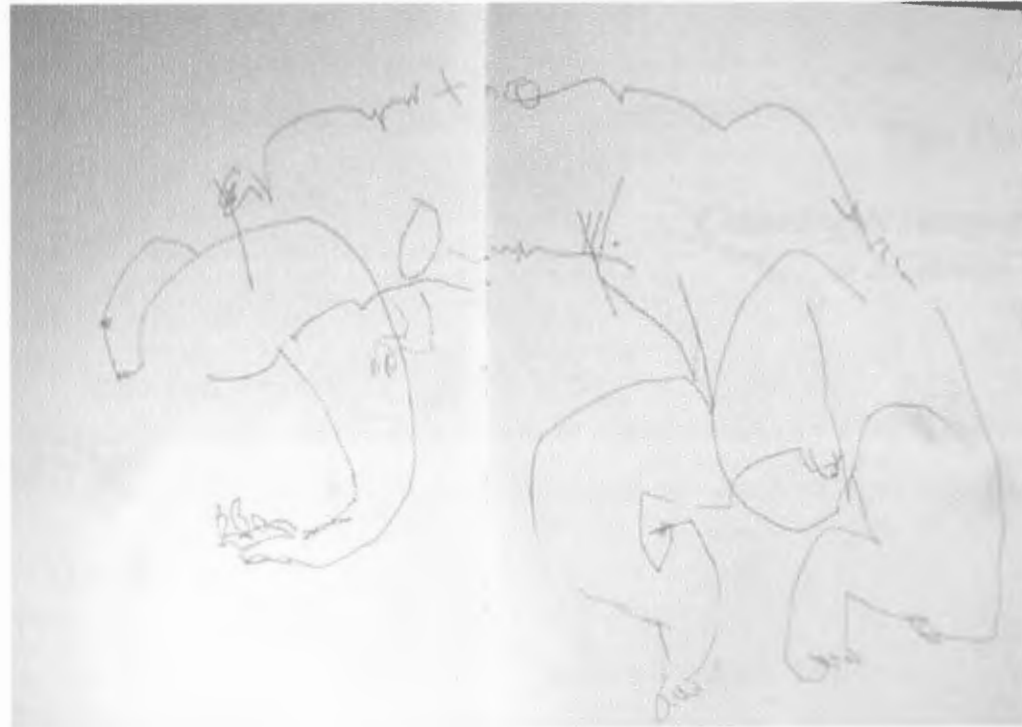
anything – sometimes factually real but often theoretical, subjective, and contingent – that can be seen to have intercultural, transnational, global effect, especially in culture: an idea (Democracy), a media presence (CNN), a cultural form (Hip Hop or Installation Art), a pattern of activity (bricolage, sampling), an image (Madonna), an economic and/or political institution (Shell Oil Corporation).

Finally, the title of this dissertation is respectfully drawn from Maya Deren’s discussion of the Haitian *loa*, Erzulie, in her exquisite work, *Divine Horsemen*.⁷ *Divine Horsemen*, written by this seminal experimental filmmaker untrained in academic anthropology, is today recognized as one of the most important anthropological texts on the subject of Haitian Vodoun. Deren’s incomparable sensitivity – which stemmed from her art – to the richness and subtlety of Vodoun as a spiritual and artistic system, and the bravery and intelligence with which she negotiated her encounter with a foreign culture for which she felt a deep affinity

⁷ ‘There are times when this sense of all things gone wrong is projected in that combined rage and despair which is Erzulie Ge-Rouge. With her knees drawn up, the fists clenched, the jaw rigid and the tears streaming from her tight-shut eyes, she is the cosmic tantrum...’, in M. Deren, *Divine Horsemen* (London: McPherson and Company. 1953:143). For an excellent discussion of this deity in another “New World” form, Dàda-Bàyònni, see Thomson’s *Face of the Gods* (Munich: Prestel, and The Museum for African Art, New York. 1993:246-248).

are the source of the brilliance of her words. In her writing, she at once honours and dissolves the always fading differences between observation and participation, and between academic study and felt

emotional connection. Hers is a sensitivity to which I aspire, and for this reason my dissertation is dedicated first to her living memory.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

PART ONE: Theory

The Cosmic Tantrum

*Cultivating an Insurgent Ancestral Aesthetic
as a Cultural Theory of the Global*



Theorising the Contemporary Global

How does one create an image of a world whose tempos appear to move in radically new states of discord? How does one speak in a global environment in which marketing instantly appropriates the material of cultural resistance and artists have taken up all the tactics of advertising? How can one possibly craft a cultural politic in a world where Microsoft deploys its private police force against organized crime syndicates selling software in Eastern Europe and China, and where technology is a permanent part of the human body? How do we express our humanity when genetic engineering seems an inevitable, defining element of the near future of humanness?

Apparently universally, humanity finds itself in a new place. Suddenly, everything seems radically mobile, exponentially more complex as technology transforms our understanding of time and space. Human social structures appear confusingly, terrifyingly unstable as the tools we use to perceive and communicate are continually renewed. Our gaze shifts on a daily basis, the sweep of our vision changes hue at a moment's notice – we make attempts to move in time with it all. Theorising the global can feel increasingly futile, yet we do – we must as we always have – attempt to make maps of the world.

Accounts of postmodernism as condition and as theory have occupied a great deal of scholarly time and effort. I begin this section by offering a general catalogue of postmodernism's attempts to create images of contemporary culture and society⁸. Following this, I discuss some of the defining principles of the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic and their relationships to – and I argue, *within* – the postmodern predicament. In doing so, I construct a proposition of a cultural theory of the global grounded in the ancestral aesthetics of the African Diaspora.

Generally, postmodernism as lived condition is said to be characterised, in no particular order, by: the radical growth and spread of digital technology, attended by an equally dramatic expansion of global networks of information and entertainment media; a new interconnectivity and immediacy of communication; a predominance of simulation; an increased mobility of multinational capital such that sites of production and consumption are far removed from each other and corporations operate as institutions lifted from geographic locations; a mass mobility of populations

⁸ This general catalogue of the characteristics of postmodernism is drawn from a range of readings and is generally accepted and agreed upon. However, I cite the following as general sources for the two paragraphs that follow: Boyne and Rattansi's introductory discussion in R. Boyne & A. Rattansi, eds, *Postmodernism and Society* (London: Macmillan. 1993:1-45) and Frederic Jameson's *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press. 1993).

through voluntary and forced migrations forming diasporas of a growing number of ethnic and national groups; a crisis in which the nation-state, whose borders appear fragile and permeable, is increasingly called into question as an effective institution; a rise in the wake of the Cold War of ethnic nationalisms provoking intractable, intensely violent conflicts that



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 9

further erode confidence in the nation-state. In culture, postmodernism is characterised by: a dissolution of the perceived differences between “high” and “low” art; a tendency toward pastiche and polyvocality as aesthetic strategies, as in the appropriation of marketing and advertising techniques in visual art, the sampling and sharing of material from other cultures in pop music, and in the tendency in film and fashion to recycle images and texts from previous historical eras; a growing complex of globally available products and icons in an increasingly intricate and interconnected cultural marketplace.

Postmodernism as theory is equally complex and necessarily overlaps with most of the above. Beginning with its roots in structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, postmodernism offers a discursive worldview. Generally, it is marked by: a critique of the Enlightenment notion of the unitary subject, an attendant crisis of subjectivity, and a notion of the subject as emergent and constructed within language; a concept of power as mobile and discursive; an emphasis on deconstruction as a primary theoretical strategy and a deep suspicion of any notion of objective truth; a crisis in representation and a systematic critique of the metanarratives of European modernism; the dissolution of traditional boundaries between academic disciplines forming multiple interdisciplinary critiques of

the practices of earlier “classical” disciplines; a reading of cultural products as texts and the acceptance of intertextuality as a basic characteristic of culture; again, the dissolution of the difference between “high” and “low” art and a new interest in the meanings and powers of popular culture; the integration of feminism into social theory generally and a dynamic relationship with various feminisms; an intensive investigation of the politics of the body; the study of aesthetic objects as socially active entities; the development and growth of Post-colonial Theory, Culture Studies, and other “interdisciplinary” schools of thought.

Postmodern theorists have developed numerous analytical models for contemporary global society, from Beaudrillard’s “culture of the simulacrum” – in which every sensual object is an image of another image and the true, original object is completely subsumed within an obfuscating chain of simulations (Lovejoy 1997:160-161 and 239-241) – to Frederic Jameson’s (1993) critique of the ‘logic of late capitalism’. Theorists like Octavio Zaya concede that, ‘postmodernism...[has] advanced, and perhaps marked, the sense of loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the center of the world,’ (Zaya 1997:65). Yet Postmodern Theory’s images of the post-industrial world have provoked a wide range of criticisms. Chief among these, perhaps, is the assertion that

postmodern thought has proven unable to adequately theorise global systems (Zaya 1997:66). It is suggested that Postmodern Theory, being fundamentally deconstructive, cannot grasp and thus construct images of global systems and has consequently failed to enable agency in the face of those systems. Although postmodernism opens ‘new spaces for struggle’, ‘extreme postmodernisms’ rely too heavily on deconstruction and concepts like ‘hyper-reality’, missing the continuing roles of colonial structures of authority, multinational corporate power, race, gender, and so on (Zaya 1997:65).



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2000

In response to the freedoms and limitations of postmodern thought, Post-colonial Theory and Cultural Studies theorise the global in new ways. They appear intent on a kind of theorising that is comfortable with a sense of motion previously tolerated only in the realm of the arts. They work toward richer images of global systems based on complex analyses of colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, ethnicity, cultural politics, and the nation-state. Paul Gilroy argues that ‘the theories of interculture which are presently available don’t assist us in capturing half the stories we need to consider.’ His work, overall, is a call against ‘ethnic absolutisms’ and ‘European raciology’ (1993:24), forces he sees as still dominant in theory and in the world.⁹ Mobility, the exposure of the complicity of traditional academic disciplines with colonialism and neo-colonialism, border and diaspora experience and theory, and the emergent presence of non-European systems of knowledge are some of the defining features in new theories of the contemporary global. The emphasis on mobility and diaspora responds to a world that appears to be characterised by such qualities, but more importantly, offers the structural underpin-

⁹ Gilroy employs these terms – ‘ethnic absolutisms’, ‘national absolutisms’ and ‘European raciology’ – frequently in his writing, especially in *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993); when I use them, they are enclosed in single quotation marks and henceforth credited to him.

nings for a post-national cultural theory. Gilroy maintains that dependence on the nation-state as the locus and point of origin for identity, security, and culture is ‘defensive, unimaginative, and unnecessarily pessimistic’ (1993:26). Theories that cross borders and boundaries are – in this line of thinking – held to offer new angles on culture and global society. In all of this, it appears that systems of knowledge exterior to any dominant Eurocentric worldview are pushing farther into the heart of that imagined, once real, formerly secure ‘centre’ we presently see opening to reveal a wider, wiser map of the world.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 3

Generally, postcolonial theories of the global have their sights set unflinchingly on culture. In their attempt to offer a genuinely decentred worldview in which global systems are imaged as the even sedimentations of mobile, interactive social contingencies in a non-hierarchical vision of humanity, they look to culture's artifacts and exchanges for the transcripts – the images, ideas, metaphors, styles, and structures – of their theories. Where modernism and postmodernism's 'representational tools' (Le Roux 1997:44) have proven inadequate, the creative arts, apparently, can provide better ways of 'knowing' what appears to be another "New World". Importantly, Gilroy insists that culture-makers and culture-consumers – particularly within the Black Atlantic but also generally – should be acknowledged as productive of a special kind of intelligence; the artist is to be seen as an intellectual and art objects are to be read as particular formulations of 'critical social theories' (1997:77-79).

Important post-colonial thinkers, such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Trinh Min Ha, have grafted into postmodern thought a more complex critique of the West and the colonial project they regard as the foundation of modernism. Arjun Appadurai, for example, has offered some powerful tools with which to think about global culture in the post-industrial, post-colonial epoch. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai presents us with an

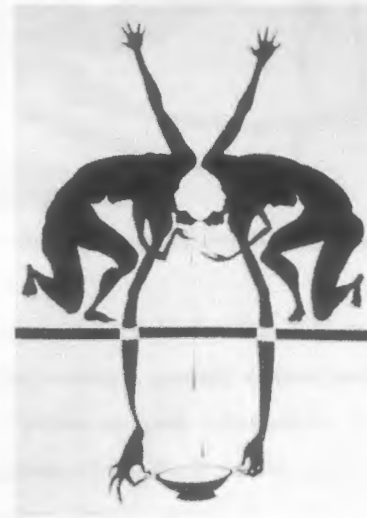
image of world culture in which the 'work of the imagination' is foregrounded as a basic operation of the individual social subject at the intersection of mediation and mobility (1996:3-5). In his image, a new global availability of information, media imagery, and cultural material combines with an equally dramatic migration of populations into multiple overlapping diasporic worlds to form a predicament in which individuals engage with imagination in the continual, daily project of creating selves and communities. Appadurai presents a set of landscape metaphors – *mediascapes*, *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes* – corresponding to various interactive forces at work in the global marketplace of ideas, images, and identities (1996:33). In so doing, he presents a model of a social subject who travels through a layering of global systems; he also offers a theoretical possibility of agency in how individuals enact such systems.

Similarly, Paul Gilroy employs fractal metaphors in posing the expressive/intellectual products of the Black Atlantic as an intercultural, transnational system of creativity and thought. He shows how this system of intercultural production explodes modernist notions of ethnicity and nationality (1993). Largely in its analysis of music, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* offers us a view onto a system of global impact arising from and expressed in the languages of the painful, unspeakable memory of slavery – in, for example,

Jazz and the Blues. This expressive matrix continues to travel back and forth across the Atlantic, forming a 'system of global communications' (1993:80) that is neither American, nor European, nor African. The interweaving of all of those territories offers a 'distinctive counterculture to modernity' (1993:36). This matrix of creativity renders older theories of race and ethnicity irrelevant and ineffective. What Gilroy names 'ethnic and national absolutisms' fall away in the face of a far more complex conception of how identities are produced and cultures are generated.

In Gilroy's analysis, then, 'cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective' against earlier 'nationalist and ethnically absolute approaches...' (1993:15). Other theorists work similar angles. In an analysis of 'New World Africanisms' in Brazil, Drewal shows how particular styles of creative transnationalism enabled the development of rich artistic traditions out of the blending of multiple 'nations' (1996:263). Artist/theorist Moyo Okediji also works a mobile viewpoint, employing analyses of contemporary art in narrating another alternative to modernism and postmodernism – his theory of 'metamodernism' (1999, 2000). In his complex and poetic theory, Okediji weaves concepts of diaspora, masking, and possession into

figures for the varied means by which identities are created, explored, transformed, and transported across time and space. His notion of 'diasporating' affords us a way out of modernism's totalising fixities, into a world where the self – crafted, sculpted, and performed – is free to act on multiple simultaneous levels, always journeying and never arriving. Importantly, Okediji insists that the transatlantic dialogue of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* 'has never been more intense' (1999:49). It continues, today as it has in the past, to offer countless innovations and possibilities.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 11

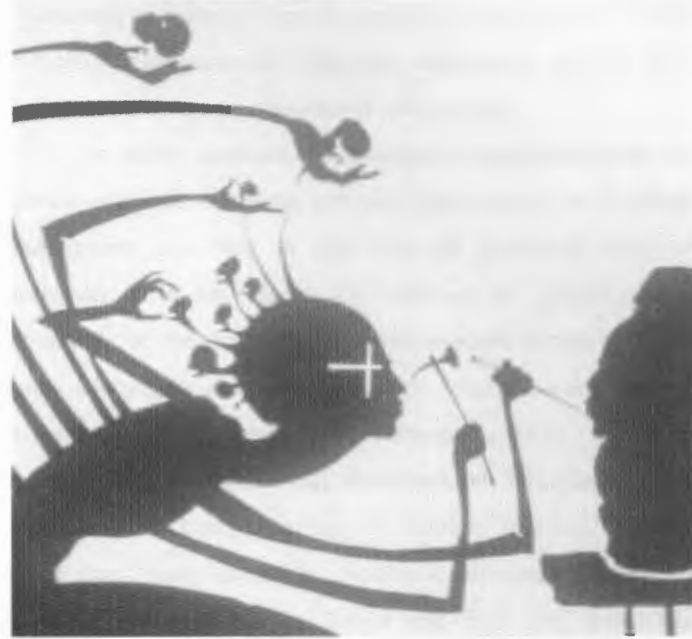
The Aesthetic Philosophies of the Black Atlantic

Africa's presence in global culture is both ancient and continually renewed.¹⁰ Although this presence obviously predates the slave trade by millennia, it was the horror of the Middle Passage that disbursed tens of millions of West and Central Africans throughout Europe and the Western Hemisphere. It is in this way that the spiritual, artistic and cultural activities and philosophies of the Yoruba, Bakongo, Fon, Ewe, Mande, Ejagham, Igbo, Kongo¹¹, and other peoples have transported, interwoven, and proliferated themselves across the entire body of global culture.

In the last thirty years or so, the body of scholarship on the various creativities of the African Diaspora has grown – thanks to the work of scholars and artist/researchers like Robert Farris Thompson, Henry John Drewal, Margaret Drewal, Lydia Cabrera, William Bascom, Babatunde Lawal, Roland Abiodun, Isabel and

¹⁰ Gerardo Mosquera is rightly emphatic that the word 'influence' would be inadequate here. See G. Mosquera, 'Eleggua at the (Post?)Modern Crossroads' in A. Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1996:225).

¹¹ These are the main 'language' or 'culture' groups Thompson considers in his seminal works, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books. 1984) and *Face of the Gods* (Munich: Prestel, and The Museum for African Art, New York. 1993).



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 13

Jorge Castellanos, Olabiyi Babalola Yai, William Fagg and others (Lindsay 1996:218) – into a partially realised and fully recognised realm of inquiry within academic scholarship. In the process, the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic have been revealed as a major contemporary force. Before these developments, African “traditions” had been either completely ignored or radically misappropriated by the Western academy. Generally, in one of the



Detail, *The Cosmic Tantrum*, Canvas 3¹²

central devices of the colonial project, the European mind has positioned Africa in an imagined primordial past (either in the sense of a lost naïveté or a long-surpassed degenerate state of inertia), taxonomising Africa, its people, and its cultural artifacts into an

¹² *The Cosmic Tantrum* (canvas, paper, wood, light sources; approximately 4m x 4m x 4m) is a lightwork installation, originally shown at the Michaelis School of Art in May 2001. It consists of four backlit canvases suspended from the ceiling and was an important precursor to *The Eternal Carnival*.

evolutionary narrative chain as primitive precursors to Western modernity. This particular historicity continues to operate hand in hand with contemporary legacies of colonialism.

In reality, however, the ancestral spiritualities of the Black Atlantic and their attendant arts and philosophies are thoroughly contemporary not only in that they are practiced today with continually renewed vigour by millions of people, but as importantly in the sense of being postmodern forms. This is a system of thought and cultural activity – incorporating the visual arts, music, poetry, literature, oral literature, dance, theatre and performance, theological and philosophical thought – that is polyvocal at its core, accepting of multiple simultaneous truths (rather than being caught in modernist binarisms between, for example, Truth and Falsity, Good and Evil, Self and Other), inherently mobile, and structurally decentred: there is no Pope, there can be no Rome, and the author always simultaneously ‘speaks’ and ‘is spoken’ (Sarup 1989:8).

Thompson has referred to this system of belief as ‘the danced faiths’ (Thompson in Brown 1996:82). As a whole, this matrix of creativity forms one of the world’s great wisdom traditions. Today, countless manifestations of African-based religious belief are practised in the Western Hemisphere alone: throughout the Caribbean, especially in Haiti (Vodoun), Cuba

(Santería) and Trinidad, in Brazil (Candomblé, Lucumí, Macumba and Umbanda) and the United States (Santería and in aspects of African American religion and art). Add to this the still-vital practice of these religions across Africa and parts of Europe. Thompson reminds us that as the United States progresses through major demographic shifts in its racial/cultural composition, the numbers of practitioners of ‘Africanising spirituality’ within the borders of the U.S. can be projected to grow importantly in both scale and influence in years to come (Thompson 1991:3).

These trends coincide with a proliferation of images and forms from the Black Atlantic in contemporary popular culture, perhaps most visibly in visual art and music¹³. The aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic occupy a special and increasingly visible position in the recent history of contemporary “fine art”, in the work of, for example: Jean Michel Basquiat, David Hammons, Betye Saar, Alison Saar, José Bedia, Ana Mendieta, Requelín Mendieta, Juan Boza, Wilfredo Lam, Elaine Soto, Arturo Lindsay, Manuel Mendive, Marta María Pérez, Moyo Okediji, John Biggers, Jeff Donaldson, Winnie Owens-Hart, Quattara, Sokari Douglas Camp, and countless others (Mosquera 1996:228-256 and Lindsay

¹³ In contemporary music, of note here are direct references to spiritual characters and concepts in Hip Hop and Rap genres, as in Tricky and A Tribe Called Quest, to name only two.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival, Tapestry 2*

1996:204-218). In recent scholarship, there is a critical effort to begin to reveal the names of specific artistic masters in Africa – especially in Yoruba art history – whose identities have been lost in European accounts (Pictin 1994:5-6). Furthermore, all devotees of these ancestral spiritualities are necessarily artist practitioners.

These “lay artists” engage in a dizzying array of creative endeavors – sculpture, painting, drawing, beadwork, weaving, quilting, embroidery, ceramics, all of which are encompassed in the installation art form of the altar – in the honouring of various gods and spiritual principles. Finally, the aesthetic philosophies of the African Diaspora are powerfully emergent in contemporary social theory, as in the work of Gilroy, Okediji, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and many others.

Thus we have a vast web of revitalising cultural practice expanding Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, as described by the term *recopilación*: a Spanish Diasporic term describing today’s ongoing exchange between practitioners of ancestral spiritualities in the “New World” and those in Africa, in which ‘lost nuances’ are regained and concepts and images are renewed (Thompson 1993:2).

The aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic are grounded in the practice of honouring the ancestors as the mediators of the relationship between humanity and god – between subjectivity and meaning, the self and divinity. This is an intricately monotheistic system. Totality is the basic state of the universe and god is its creator and essence. Within this, humans are possessed of the potential to communicate with god via the mediating, affective, interactive presence of the divine in the material form of the memory of our progenitors – those of whom we are issue – the

ancestors. The presence of the ancestors is actively embodied in and attendant to the world of the living in many ways. These presences, figured as a community of spiritual characters governing all aspects of human experience, are known by many names: the *orisha* or *orisa* (in Yoruba and Afro-Cuban Worlds), the *orixa* (in Brazil and the Portuguese-speaking world), the *loa* (in the Haitian Diaspora); *los muertos*, *les mystères* (Deren 1953); in English, *the family*.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2000

The Ancestry of Postmodernism, the Postmodern Ancestral

The suggestion of a cultural theory offered in this dissertation begins with a particular reading of the relationship between postmodernism and the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic. From here, I attempt to illuminate something of the rich relationship between the two, which I take to be indicative of a hidden history, a deep cultural exchange that has thus far gone unacknowledged; it is a history that appears to be replete with possibility. What follows is a partial listing of some of the defining, interwoven features of Diasporic arts and philosophies, with special attention to their “similarities” with Postmodern Theory. I begin with the pivotal concept of *àse*, from which emanates a series of attendant principles examined in the sections that follow.

Àse: Beauty, Morality, and Discursive Power

Conventional histories generally hold that postmodernism has its roots in structuralist thought, which placed language at the centre of European philosophical inquiry. From Lacan’s critique of the fixed linguistic sign through Foucault’s work on the nature of power, postmodern thought has elaborated an image of power as relational

and incessantly contested in the ongoing matrices of language – power is decentred and mobile. It is not a form affixed to the individual or to institutional structures, but a constant motion, a perpetual exchange composed of momentary utterances. This notion of power as the emergent product of human discourse dovetails beautifully with the ancient African concept of *àse*.

Àse (roughly pronounced *ab-shay*) is a word of Yoruba origin, often translated as ‘character’ or ‘the power to make things happen’. *Àse* originates and flows from god; it is the creative force of the universe. It is present in varying degrees in people, actions, objects, places, and, most importantly, language. *Àse* is the power by which god fashioned the world, through which the ancestors invest the world with their wisdom, and with which humans create their lives. It is the power that resides in and is communicated by a well crafted, beautiful, somehow-potent work of art, and the means by which the *orisha* enact their divine wisdom and creativity in the world of the living. The *orisha* are at once the divine embodiments of *àse* and the agents by which *àse* is transmitted into the material world. *Àse* is manifest, in varying degrees of artistic and moral potency, in everything.

As a philosophical concept, *àse* is multi-layered and extremely complex, fusing notions of artistic beauty with moral righteousness in a fundamentally discursive concept of power; it

achieves the fusion of aesthetic beauty and moral strength so central to Yoruba and Black Atlantic philosophy. Most importantly, as an aesthetic as well as moral force, *àse* is a linguistic concept – it is present in and enacted through language (Drewal 1996:270 and Hallgren 1995:88-98). Throughout the ancestral spiritual systems of the Black Atlantic the primary metaphor for the entry of the spirits of the dead into the world of the living is a linguistic one – the ancestors *speaking* memory and meaning. *Àse* is manifest ‘especially...in words’ (Ramos 1996:59). As the universe begins with a unitary god, *àse* – and with it the world – is initiated by the Creator as a speech-act. The *orisha*, imbued with the power of *àse*, speak the memory of their knowledge to the living. In turn, their living descendants speak *àse* into the devotional objects and spaces they employ in their communications with the divine. Power, beauty, morality, and meaning – as well as the ancestral presence in which these all are grounded – are discursive.

Àse is, in fact, creativity itself and its centrality translates into a worldview in which reality is malleable, constructed, created as an act of will, narrated in language by humanity. In the myths of origins in the Black Atlantic, god is often imagined to have created the first human by commissioning the divine sculptor, Àjàlá, to fashion the ‘inner head’ of each new human life. Each of Àjàlá’s sacred works becomes a person’s character and destiny (Lawal

1996:9 and Okediji 2000:157); each new life is a reenactment of god’s original creative vocalisation. ‘The myth that the human body is a work of art not only implies that the human being is a rational, divinely ordered creation and an embodiment of reason, but has encouraged the Yoruba to use sculpture as a substitute for localising the spirit of an *orisa*...’ (Lawal 1996:10).¹⁴



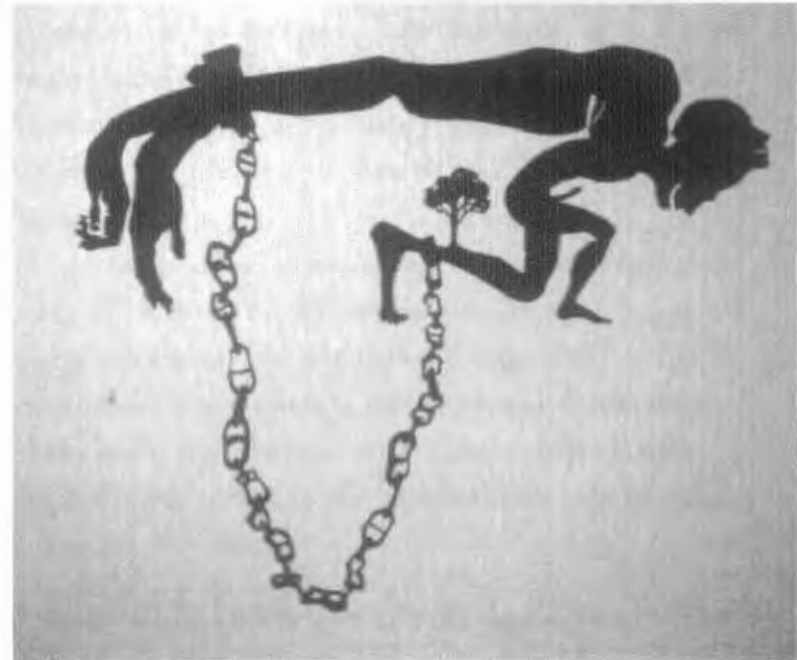
Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2000

¹⁴ This point regarding the relationship between physical matter and ancestral presence is explored in greater depth below in the section on embodiment.

Implicit in the concept of *àse* is an interconnectivity between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ realities (Lawal 1996:10). A person who is said to be possessed of *àse* is one who radiates composure, coolness, creativity, and a calm moral strength – an inner beauty. In Yoruba aesthetics, this is *iwàpèlè*, ‘gentle character’ (Abiodun, et. al. 1994). This image of the human subject – as a cosmic work of art created in the exchange between a life lived and the divinity it embodies – encompasses all of the aspects of *àse*: as creative force, moral principle, outer radiance, inner beauty, human will, and spiritual interconnectivity.

Thus it is clear that under the rubric of *àse*, the philosophies of the Black Atlantic are aesthetic systems at their core. Indeed, Robert Farris Thompson is often quoted, ‘the Yoruba assess everything aesthetically’ (Thompson in Brown 1996:80). As a philosophic concept positing creativity as the first principle of the world and the individual, *àse* closes the modernist distance between the artist and the non-artist and, as aesthetics come into play in the assessment of every thing and every life, the differences between art and life dissolve. The *orisha* require constant attention and attendance by their descendents in the world of the living. The daily, ongoing relationship each devotee conducts with her/his *orisha* is a creative, artistic process. Creativity is the domain of every person and the faithful realise their own

creativity in the making of the art objects and spaces they use in their engagements with the *orisha*. Out of this flows an image of the “artist-priest” who engages both free expression and penitence in the moral/artistic practice of belief and devotion. Indeed, Lawal reminds us that in the ancestral aesthetics of the Black Atlantic, art is integrated with every aspect of life, serving an essential purpose – ‘to make the spirit manifest’ (Lawal 1996:7).



Detail, *The Cosmic Tantrum*, Canvas 3

The Rich Relationship: Dialecticism and the Existential State of the Orisha

In the mirror reflection of our present selves, the memory of the past is lived as a shadow inversion of life in the material world. Life and Death are created, cyclically, by one another; the living and the dead journey through mirrored existences. In this we can discern a second set of core principles of the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic: the centrality of the dialectical relationship, the acceptance and reverence of multiple simultaneously operating truths, and the openness and playfulness that such a worldview entails. Maya Deren captures the principle of the original dialectic eloquently in her discussion of the Divine Twins, the Haitian primordial figure of human origins, the *Marassa-Trois*:

For the Haitian, then, it is the relationship of segments which is important. The Twins are not to be separated into competitive, conflictual dualism. In Vodoun one *and* one make three; two *and* two make five; for the *and* in the equation is the third and fifth part, respectively, the relationship which makes all the parts meaningful (Deren 1953:41).

As in postmodern thought, there is a generative engagement with dualism, rather than a reductive impulse producing binary opposition. Meaning, truth, and identity are generated out of difference, the relationship between differing parts: fact and fiction, subject and object, self and other. As in poststructuralist linguistics – in which meaning emerges not in the text but in the interaction of the text and the reader – and as in postmodern feminisms – with their concern with difference, “differencing”, and the deconstruction of modernist binarisms such as self/other, nature/humanity, man/woman or white/black – the dialectical relationship is central to the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic. The dialectic is the essential state of the universe; it is divine.

Deren asserts repeatedly that, in Vodoun, there is no difference between the real and the imaginary – they operate together to generate real world effect (Deren 1953).¹⁵ Thus, the existential status of the *orisha* as beings is a matter of relationships – their existence is generated in the consciousness of the living just as the living were birthed by the ancestors. The *orisha* are simul-

¹⁵ This is also borne out in early writings on the “magical realism” of Haitian culture. See J. S. Alexis’ 1956 ‘Of the Marvelous Realism of the Haitians’ in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin, eds. *he Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge. 1995:194-198).

taneously real and imagined. They *are* the interplay between fact and fiction that is work of the imagination.¹⁶ The nature and special presence of ancestral memory – the *orisha* – can only be understood as emergent in a dialogic exchange between the world of the living and the world of the dead -- the *orisha* exist only to the extent that we in the world of the living hold them to be real, affective presences in our lives. If the living do not believe in them, listen to them, honour them, and feed them, the *orisha* cease to exist. The *orisha* long for our attention and our attendance. When we forget them – as memory, as history, as living presence – they suffer and weep, and when we acknowledge and speak with them, they enter our lives as affective powers.

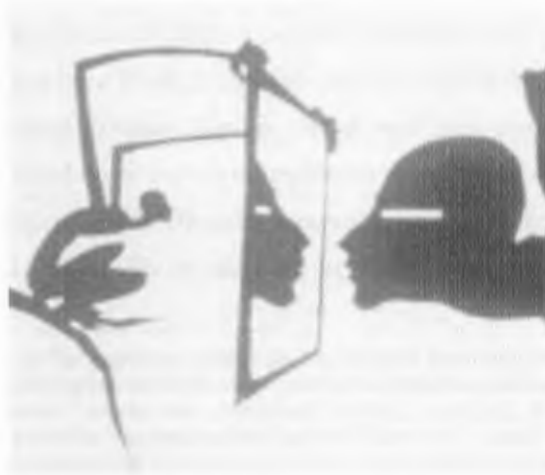
From this original dialectic spring successive cycles of complexity. Each *orisha* exists as a figure for a set of twin principles. Their divinity arises, in another mirror reflection, out of that relationship – the difference between two principles. Every *orisha* embodies a cosmic totality composed of a principle, its opposite, and all of the complexities of the relationship therein; each governs ‘the infinite nuances that constitute a particular realm of life’ (Castellanos 1996:45). As such, the ancestral spirits of the

¹⁶ Here we must be reminded of Appadurai’s ‘work of the imagination’ as a global project. See A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1996).

Black Atlantic are always characterised by endearingly human qualities (Ramos 1996:54). They are often childlike, given to the full range of contradictory emotion, and capable of the most human of mistakes and transgressions; they are unpredictable because they are always changing as they move through their lives on the “other side”. The personalities and meanings of the *orisha* change with time and circumstance to ‘reflect back to the faithful the complexity of their own lives’ (Castellanos 1996:46). Babaluaye, for example, is figured as an ailing old man and is the dread spirit of sickness. But he is also the principle of healing and is consulted in circumstances of ill health. In earlier forms, he governed small pox and the cure thereof; today his spirit is widely associated with HIV/AIDS, the moral imperative to educate and protect against it, and the hope for an end to its pandemic.

The precarious existential predicament of the *orisha* – a cosmic dialectic in which they at once create and are created by the living and so remain dependent for their existence on the consciousness of their descendents – manifests as a love relationship. The *orisha* need us and we need them, and those who “serve the family” do so with care, compassion, humour, and kindness because the lives of the *orisha* are as fragile and filled with struggle as ours. It is this dialogue of love and affection between the living and the dead that makes the *orisha* real and – although

they are regularly spoken to, heard, fed, and offered gifts – above all it is beauty that pleases and nourishes both the servitor and the god. The relationship between the artist-priest and her/his *orisha* is ‘emergent and imaginative’, highly personal, and open to all manner of new creativity (Brown 1996:78). The *orisha* are thought of as constant companions, they are sometimes formally married to a living servitor (Deren 1953:263-270), and when a devotee is initiated, s/he is said to ‘make’ her/his primary spiritual partner (Brown 1996:89). This emotional/dialectical relationship is the centre-post of worship and art in the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 7

Above all, Papa Legba (also known as Eshù, Exu, or Eleggua), easily the most widely honoured and recognised spiritual character descended from West Africa, embodies contradiction and dialecticism. As the guardian of the crossroads, Legba governs all communication between the world of the living and the world of the gods. Anyone wishing access to the divine must first appeal to him, for it is Legba who embodies language itself. Legba is also the sacred trickster, the principle of the trope. In his figure we can discern a sense of language – as in postmodern linguistics after Lacan and especially in Derrida (Sarup 1989:34-62) – as characterised by perpetual movement, always shifting, always inverting. Language is a constant slippage in the chain of signifiers; it rises from Legba’s divine trickery.

Legba is the least predictable of all the *orisha*, figured as a body forever always changing. He is imagined to have one strong leg and one lame, standing as he does with half his body in the material world and half in the spiritual world. He is described as hermaphroditic and all ages at once; he can behave and be seen as a child, an adult, or an old man. In his capacity as the divine principle of language’s constant creative slippage, Legba is imagined as enormously fertile and possessed of an insatiable sexual appetite. His personality is erratic and his actions unpredictable – he is given to rich kindnesses and fits of violent rage. As the principle of the

trope, Papa Legba governs both the unexpected horrors and pains of life as well as the intelligent, subversive trick that is survival.

In a final layering of simultaneous truths, each *orisha* – active as spiritual kin, mythological character, divine presence, artistic expression, and linguistic principle – are also employed as a theoretical model. The richness of Papa Legba’s character has attracted much attention in Linguistics and Cultural Studies. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988), traces Legba from his origins in West Africa as a character who appears in myths and stories throughout the Afro-Atlantic world and as the principle of the trope, a key linguistic strategy deployed in the cultural survival of Africans in the New World.¹⁷ As Gates and others have shown, it is the acceptance of dialecticism that translates into a profound inclusivity in New World Africanisms that has enabled their survival and increased potency through slavery and into contemporary culture. Standing as they do in opposition to modernist tendencies toward binarism, classification, taxonomy, and fixed notions of race, the *orisha* offer possibilities as figures and principles –

¹⁷ Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1988) provides a rich exploration of the many practices of *signifying* and *signifyin’*. In this dissertation, I employ the conventional spelling, ‘signifying’, but use it to convey a somewhat less conventional sense of the word – signifying as the practice of transforming through play. This is a very useful, though general, interpretation of what is in Gates Jr.’s work an extremely varied and complex linguistic practice.

theoretical tools – for narrating richer models of the individual subject and its place in the world.

Bricolage and Survival: the Subject in Language and Performance

Among people of African descent in the “New World”, the experience of slavery and racism have ‘fostered distinctive strategies for survival and affirmation’ (Drewal 1996:263). Drewal describes one of these tactics, ‘multiconsciousness’, as ‘the capacity to negotiate multiple evolving personas in social terrains where others attempt to impose identities’ (1996:263). Throughout the Western Hemisphere – in Brazil, Argentina, Haiti, Cuba, the United States, and other places – slave peoples and their descendants have employed dynamic strategies in the preservation of their cultural and philosophical inheritances from West and Central Africa. Cultural survival was achieved largely through the arts.

In a correlate to the principle of the divine dialectic, the aesthetic/philosophic traditions of the Black Atlantic are fundamentally inclusive. They are ‘inherently open’, ‘additive, eclectic, and non-exclusivistic’ (Thompson 1993:20). This inclusivity – achieved by way of varied forms of creative appropriation – facilitated the preservation of the memory and arts of the *orisha* under circumstances where the practice of African

culture was violently suppressed. Across the 'New World' devotees of the *orisha* disguised their altars and devotional objects in the images and forms of the Catholic Church. Specific *orisha* came to be associated with and represented under the guise of Catholic Saints. By recognising the similarities – or universal principles – shared with Christianity, the practitioners of ancestral spiritualities appropriated material from a foreign, dominant culture and integrated it into an expressive language that guaranteed the continuing and active presence of the *orisha*. John Mason resists the word 'syncretism' which many have used to describe the process by which African principles were blended with European icons so that they could be covertly revered. 'Transfiguration', he argues, more accurately describes this artistic, subversive survival strategy (Mason 1994:241). In this process, European and Christian forms and images were appropriated and integrated into the expanding artistic lexicon of the Diaspora in the project of cultural survival.¹⁸

¹⁸ Where I might have employed the notion of "hybridity" as the descriptive in this section, I have chosen to use "bricolage" and "appropriation", following cogent critiques of "hybridity" by Gilroy and Zaya. Zaya asserts that the "hybrid" has replaced the modernist exotic "other" in 'Alternating Currents' in M. Debord & R. Bester, eds, *Trade Routes* (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, the Netherlands. 1997:63-67) and Gilroy asserts that it disappears difference in his essay, 'For The Transcultural Record' in the same volume (21-26). The terms "appropriation" and "bricolage" imply a more active and empowered process.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 14

If the nature of the *orisha* as beings or presences is such that they simultaneously create life and are created by life, generate and are generated by *àse*, speak to and listen to the living, then we must again discern a close relationship with postmodern linguistic analyses. After Lacan, the individual subject is emergent in language, the self does not exist outside of dialogue with the other (Sarup 1989:12). In the sense of language's constant slippage

(Sarup 1989:35), we understand a progression of meaning that recalls the nature of the presence of both the individual and the ancestors – the *orisha* are manifest in the world of the living as a succession of images, of significations. Similarly, a self, a life lived, is at once the issue and embodiment of a living past and the means by which the future is created – the self is stretched across time within discourse. In living a life, we create the ancestor we will one day become. In a cyclical folding of linear time, the self is sampled – appropriated – from the past, present, and future. The notion of ancestral presence encompasses all of this: we inherit our selves from the past, we negotiate the meanings of the past in the ways we choose to live, and in living a life, we are creating the meaning of the future – a future ancestor who will embody the memory our past.

One of the consequences of a decentred, mobile vision of power is that the nature of authority and authorship is permanently undermined. In postmodernity after Lacan, the individual subject is an entity that speaks because it is spoken, knows itself only because it cannot attain unity with the defining presence of the other. In Lacan's linguistics, society inhabits the individual (Sarup 1989:8) – the subject is constructed in language, sampled from innumerable sources. The unconscious is the layering of unspoken and unfulfilled signifiers, an encyclopedic accumulation of lost,

repressed memories and partially expressed fragments of consciousness (Sarup 1989:11). This resonates closely with the notion of the *orisha* as the cosmic embodiment of historical memory, with the image of the subject as the inheritor of all that came before, and with Diasporic conceptions of the status of the artist.

In Lacan's analysis and in postmodernism generally, there is no claim to original authorship – the modernist/romantic ideal of the lone artist producing originality falls rapidly away. From the early stages of postmodern thought, especially after Claude Lévi-Strauss, the artist is conceptualised as a “bricoleur” – we do not create originality, but “sample” our selves and our expressions in a performance woven from multiple sources. Concepts and practices of artistic production in the African Diaspora function precisely along these lines. The artist is given her/his due respect and appreciation in the execution of a work of art, but if beauty is attained it is because the presence of divinity can be recognised by participants in a succession of contexts. The artist works in dialogue, as one voice in a polyvocal exchange, and creates simultaneous expressions of the individual and the macrocosm.

In turn, the meaning of a work of art is generated in the interchange of multiple contexts of interpretation. In the arts of the altar, for example, the *orisha* participate as ‘aesthetically

interested agents' in the creative process; in their kinetic potential as the layerings of the unconscious – as dreams, intuitions, impulses, slips of the tongue, and so on -- they communicate their needs, desires and tastes to the artist/priest (Brown 1996:115). Art objects, physically or conceptually, are constantly reworked, changed, added to, fed, improved, and improvised upon. Art objects are ongoing creations. As the famed Nigerian artist Quattara asserts, 'it is not [the artist] who paints' (Harris 1999:15), but the artist and her/his history in concert with his contemporaries.

In the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic, then, the artist's vision accumulates through many ages and many eyes, and the individual chooses her/his self from an infinite marketplace of possibility. It was through precisely this kind of creative inclusivity – the mixing of different influences, forms, and images in what Drewal calls 'visual signifyin' (Drewal 1996:270) – that the African aesthetic philosophies survived slavery and colonialism to 'diasporate' themselves across the body of global culture. Appropriation – pastiche, collage, sampling – is a central aesthetic principle of the arts of the Diaspora, the means by which African artistic and spiritual practices survived a long cruel history, and a defining, even dominant artistic device in contemporary cultural production globally.

The interactivity of all of the levels on which bricolage is active attests to the significance of Black Atlantic aesthetic philosophy within the contemporary global. This is most evident in the DJ – or break-beat – aesthetic. Sampling is a dominant artistic strategy in contemporary culture, especially in popular music and the visual arts. Where the technologies and techniques of marketing and advertising have been adopted in the creation of beauty and social criticism in contemporary visual art (of special note here would of course be Pop Art), Hip Hop, Rap, Electronica, Dub, and Fusion Jazz reinvigorate the Diasporic principle of bricolage on an almost daily basis. Sampling, as survival strategy and as art, is so central to global popular culture that the DJ – remixing samples from every possible source in the global marketplace – stands as a central icon of creativity generally and, possibly, a latter-day incarnation of the sacred re-mixer of language, the trickster.

Embodiment: the Ontological Status of the Cultural Object

In the wisdom traditions of the Black Atlantic, *àse* is the varied, crucially important mechanism by which objects, materials, and bodies are invested with and held to contain spiritual presence, cultural meaning, artistic beauty, and moral certitude. *Àse* is the form of the presence of the *orisha* in the world of the living. Embodiment in the aesthetics of the Black Atlantic – paralleling postmodern ideas on the status of cultural objects – is the process by which *àse* is active in otherwise inanimate objects. It arises from the perceptions and interpretations of a community of observers and participants, living and dead.¹⁹ Art objects are possessed of an affective presence.

In postmodernism there is a relentless reading of cultural products – art works, advertisements, logos, emblems, clothes, films, books, performances – as texts. These texts are activated, transformed, and rendered meaningful by their readers and their contexts; the reader is an active participant in the meaning of the text and the object takes on its affective presence as a function of the interactivity of expression and interpretation. We might take

¹⁹ Drewal cautions us that it is not the object that is worshiped; rather, devotional art works serve to ‘activate and intensify worship’. See H. Drewal, ‘Signifyin’ Saints’ in A. Lindsay, ed., *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1996:263-289).

“readings” of the work of Joseph Bueys as emblematic of postmodern conceptions of the life of the artifact. In his work, it is matter and the juxtaposition of various kinds of matter – living and dead – that generate associations in the viewer producing meaning. Be it fat or wood, the body of a dead animal, or the body of the artist, the emotional impetus of forms and their interactions enact a set of relationships that connects to wider social, psychological, and spiritual motifs. Art objects are “animated” by the social lives they lead – as expressions of the artist, as aesthetically pleasing compositions, as the objects of inquiry and interrogation, and as commodities in the art marketplace. The various social, psychological, and intellectual lives of the artworks rise from the visions of those who encounter them.

Similarly, in the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic, objects have lives and histories. They are capable, given the proper attendance and verbal expression, not of representing or symbolising, but *embodying* the spirits of the *orisha*. *Àse* is transferred from speaker – or artist – to art object (Hallgren 1995:90); it is spoken into the artwork in order to manifest the spirit of the *orisha*, so that memory and wisdom of the ancestors may be available for consultation, so that the exchange between the living and the dead may proceed. Brown discusses Michael Jackson’s take on the status of cultural objects in the Black Atlantic traditions; the creative arts

are given to the task of generating objects as ‘embodied knowledge’, objects active beyond the structures and workings of verbal language (Jackson in Brown 1996:85).



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

In a discussion of the work of El Anatsui, Pictin suggests that cultural products can be seen as ‘weavings of contexts’ in ‘the projection of ideas and experiences “into” and “through” works of art’ (Pictin 1998:21-22). El Anatsui is a classic example of a Diasporic artist in that he insists on the work’s status as a ‘container of memory’ (Pictin 1998:19). Although the ontological status of the art object in the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic is a matter of lively debate, the principle that matter can be infused with spiritual presence is essential. Art objects are points of focus for the expression and reception of divinity (it is the divine presence that is revered, not the object itself). If *Áse* is the force by which an object is “made” to contain and communicate spiritual presence, then the meaning of that presence is filtered through a progression of communal interpretations. Meaning is generated by humanity as much as it is by divinity and art attains its life in the dialectical progression of social contexts. This momentum, driven forward by art, means that the seemingly simplest of forms – a tree, a forked branch, a forest, a seashell, a bowl of water – can embody the most complex of universal principles in the subtle but felt presence of the divine.

Embodiment as an artistic device is in frequent use in contemporary art and as importantly in postcolonial interpretations of cultural material. Paul Gilroy shares his affection and reverence

for records – objects crafted of vinyl and paper and easily taken simply as commodities – as embodying an expansive history of revolt against racism; he speaks of them as ‘loaded commodities’, elements in a ‘translocal, transcultural system’ communicating stories that ‘resist being turned into speech or writing’, embodiments of the unspeakable experience of the Middle Passage and life under human slavery (1997:24). On how a cultural product, in this case a 1960’s hit song about Nelson Mandela by The Impressionists, can embody and conduct meaning across time and space, Gilroy writes:

It was produced in Britain by the children of Caribbean and African settlers from raw materials supplied by Black Chicago but filtered through Kingstonian sensibility in order to pay tribute to a Black hero whose global significance lies beyond the limits of his partial South African citizenship and the impossible national identity which goes with it (1993:95).

It is not matter that matters, but the meaning maintaining interconnectivity that animates a record, a mound of clay adorned with cowries, or a sculpture by Joseph Bueys. Throughout the Black Atlantic, the artist/devotee understands and respects ‘the

ingenuity of talent in transforming base and minute materials to the most amazing finish...the ordinary or even less than ordinary becomes extraordinary’ (Okediji 1999:117).

The notion that meaning can be manifest in matter finds its fullest expression in spiritual possession, where the *orisha* are understood to occupy the physical body of the devotee. Spiritual possession is a formal goal of much of the interconnected arts and ritual practices of the Black Atlantic and it is the moment at which the *orisha* are closest to the living world. Deren suggests that the moment of possession represents the final conquest of the material world by the spirits of the dead (Deren 1953:30). Spiritual possession is the point at which embodiment attains a performative state. It is the culmination of the Diasporic assertion that anything can be infused with meaning, including bodies; it fulfills and activates an entire artistic system given to the manifestation of memory and meaning in the physical world.²⁰

In the arena of contemporary visual art, possession translates roughly into performance art, where artists take up this ancient practice in new and provocative ways. Marta María Pérez

²⁰ Moyo Okediji takes the notion of spiritual possession as a figure for the ways in which artists are active in cultural and social worlds. He names this ‘diasporating’. See M. Okediji, ‘Black Skin, White Kins’ in N. Mirzoeff, ed., *Diaspora and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge. 2000:143-162). I cover the subject of possession in greater depth in the section on diaspora.

transforms herself into an altar, for example, building devotional sculptures to the trickster god Legba around her body. Like the human bodily works of the divine sculptor, like the devotee who diasporates when the presence of the *orisha* arrives to occupy her/his body, like an artwork in a gallery accepting layers of meaning as it passes through audiences and markets, artists today regularly use their own bodies as the containers of meaning in a recalculation of the ancient understanding that ‘anything can be made sacred’ (Byrne 1993:vii).

The Black Atlantic Altar: Polyvocality, Interdisciplinarity, and Intertextuality

In the arts of the Black Atlantic, each element in that vast chain of creativities comes to its fullest realisation when it enters into a final exchange at a polysensory, polyvocal centre – the Black Atlantic altar. An expressive and interactive device as varied in its forms and styles as the different geographic and cultural locations where it is produced, altars are the ‘Face of God’.²¹ The altar is fed, gazed into, spoken to, listened to, revered as portal to the soul of the cosmos (Thompson 1993:28-29). The altar is a crossroads where

²¹ Many writers have used this term in discussions of the Afro-Atlantic altar; however, the single most important work on this art form is Thompson’s *Face of the Gods* (Munich: Prestel, and The Museum for African Art, New York, 1993).

the living world and the spiritual world meet, where the descendants of the dead generate an engagement with a visible and tangible presence of memory and agency, and where ‘scale models of heaven’ offer the possibility of ‘mediation, meditation, and conviction’ (Thompson 1993:13 and 1993:21).

Within the space of the altar every thing is loaded with layers of meaning, thrown up in a symphonic aesthetic play of relationships between a limitless diversity of forms: art objects, architecture, cloth and beadwork, food and drink, smells and tastes, images and icons, dance and movement, poetry, text, drawing, music, speech, plants, animals, the bodies of the faithful. Black Atlantic altars can be temporary or permanent, deceptively simple or elaborate and complex; they can be created at almost any point in time and space (Brown 1996:109 and Thompson 1993). The altar is the essential site at which all of the belief systems, artistic practices, and aesthetic forms of the Diaspora combine in playful interactive fruition. As Brown suggests, Black Atlantic altars ‘instantiate’ maps of the self and the cosmos where all of the participating art works are elements in a ‘ritual system’ of expression and exchange (Brown 1996:78-79). These are moments integrating all modes of creative expression toward the formal goal of manifesting the sublime – the bringing of the ancestors into the material objects and living bodies of the present.

The Black Atlantic altar is a postmodern form in all respects: it embodies intertextuality and reveres no separation between formal disciplines (Abiodun 1994:46); it is concerned not with the dualism of form and content, but with a unity of the two generative of content; it is polyvocal, always a creation resulting from the dialogue between a community of living servitors and the *orisha* as creative participants (Lawal 1996:11); meaning is generated by the interaction of multiple forms at the intersection of matter and the imaginary. A work of art, the altar is never finished, always in process; it is simultaneously crafted, performed, enjoyed, heard, and read. This interactivity remains open, the emergent product of a communal improvisation, 'forever dissolving opposition into unity' (Thompson 1993:20).

The altar can be seen as the epitome of a signal practice in postmodern art: the installation. The multidisciplinary art environment has appeared as a major form in postmodern art practice as visual art has given itself to the pursuit of a different kind of impact in its interaction with and adoption of new spaces, new technologies, and the possibilities these offer. Art is no longer necessarily a single object, but an engagement with multiple sensations; the meaning of an art work no longer resides in the thing, but slips between the interactions of different forms of mediation, and between those forms of mediation and the

receptivity of the viewer. Paralleling this perfectly, altars can be understood as communally narrated stories – 'storytelling in a personal style' (Brown 1996:114) – their mode of expression, intertextuality. There is no meaning, the *orisha* are not present until the entirety of the work achieves a polyvocal interchange.

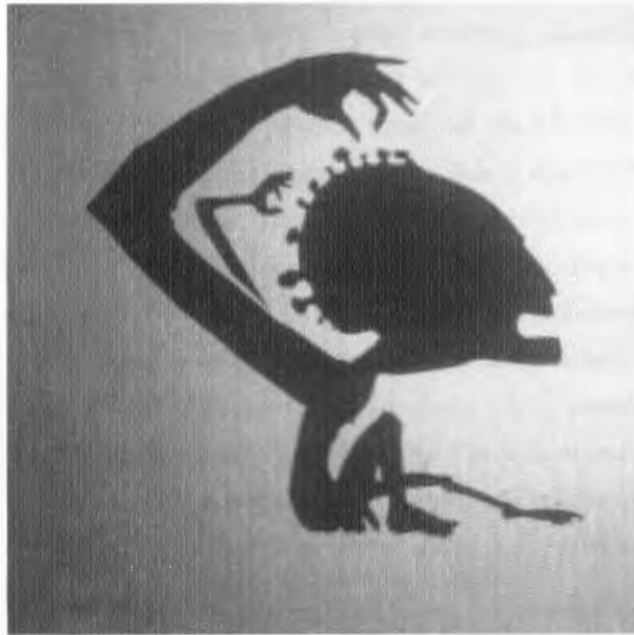
To summarise, David Byrne, on the altar as a living work of art and an embodiment of a play of voices:

The altar is...a sacred sculpture. It is 'visual Jazz', constantly reworked and reactivated. The improvisational aesthetic is...not confined to music. The altars crumble, melt, rot and decay like a living being...and are constantly being renewed. The "artworks" must be fed. They gain strength through use (Byrne 1993:vii).

Mobility and Diaspora in the Arts and the World

Henry Drewal shares with us: 'Yoruba's speak of their culture as a "river that never rests"...there are fast moving streams and slower deeper currents, tributaries and ebbs, cross currents and countless flows' (Drewal 1996:264). In this we are able to discern not only a

sense the restless mobility of the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic, but a potent image of diaspora itself. In another writing, Drewal expands this sense of travel as central to Yoruba aesthetic philosophy, explaining, 'Journeying connotes constant newness, unceasing explorations, countless discoveries, revelations, and insights' (Drewal 1994:193).



Detail, *The Cosmic Tantrum, Canvas 2*

Where postmodernist thought has gone to great lengths with great success to deconstruct modernism's search for objective truth – in science, in the politics of the nation-state, in the identity of the individual subject, in historical narrativity – postcolonial theory has continued along this trajectory in its more sophisticated analyses of colonialism and global systems. 'With the old house of criticism, history, and intellectual certitude in ruins' (Zaya 1997:64), with the world radically mobile as it appears to be, with global culture defined by mass migration as a basic condition, with the nation-state looking increasingly fragile, and with identity appearing more as a choice than an immovable fact, diaspora has emerged as a metaphor for the universal state of the subject and the global condition (Okediji 2000:159). Appadurai, Gilroy, Okediji, and others employ diaspora as a figure for identities, communities, institutions, and global networks of power and creativity:

Diaspora and border theories articulate a "third time-space" which disrupts categorisation by race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, or empire. Derived from historically specific experiences, this "third time-space" dwells in ... histories "too mobile...for fixity" (Zaya 1997:66).

Gilroy works with this Diasporic sense of mobility – a ‘restlessness of spirit’ central to the aesthetics of the Black Atlantic – as both a function of the collective memory of displacement and disbursement via the Atlantic slave trade and as a conscious aesthetic strategy offering an alternative to modernity (Gilroy 1993:16).

In Diasporic aesthetic philosophy, as we have seen, neither artists nor art works have a fixed identity or meaning, but migrate through a series of communal, diasporic contexts, gathering upon their bodies layers of meaning. As in an altar, the constituent elements never ‘reduce...to abstract signifieds’ (Brown 1996:100), but slip and shift, remaining relational and mobile in their capacities as containers of meaning. The artist, in this vein, is understood in Yoruba cosmology under the concept of *àrè* – an itinerant, a migrant (Harris 1999:13 and Yai 1994:113). The predicament of the artist is one of ‘constant departure’ because ‘art is an invitation to infinite metonymic difference and departure ... not a summation of sameness and imitation’ (Yai 1994:113). The artist is one who travels through life accumulating a layering of wisdoms and understandings, registering those within the play of tradition and renewal.

Moyo Okediji brilliantly employs the Yoruba/Diasporic image of the artist, linking spiritual possession, diaspora, and performance in an aesthetic matrix that offers us an image of the

contemporary artist as an agent of the ‘postnational subject’ (Oguibe 1997:10). He offers a theoretical alternative to the strictures of modernism and the passiveness of postmodernism in what he calls ‘metamodernism’ (Okediji 1999, 2000). Linking the Black Atlantic practice of spiritual possession – in which the body of the devotee is temporarily infused with the presence of ancestral memory, becoming a vessel through which an *orisha* enters the material world to converse with the living – with performative practices in contemporary art, Okediji constructs an image of the artist as one who explores the terrains of multiple ‘diasporating’ selves. In possession, he suggests, when the body of the servitor is ‘colonised’ by the *orisha*, it becomes the ‘Transatlantic crossroads’ (2000:146), and the humanity of that person ‘goes to the diaspora’.²² When artists such as Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell, and others “perform” the identities of “others” – who might otherwise be figured as “enemy” or “different” – they too ‘diasporate’ into multiple selves. They activate themselves as a ‘meta-body’, challenging modernist notions of identity. The artist ‘mimes the

²² In a fascinating twist, Okediji posits colonisation as a spectrum of activity. On one end of the spectrum, there is the ‘hopeful’ form of colonisation, when the spirit of an ancestor ‘colonises’ the body of a living person. On the other end of the spectrum is ‘death’; we can safely presume here that Okediji refers to the sort of colonisation inflicted on Africa by Europe. See M. Okediji, ‘Black Skin, White Kin’ in N. Mirzoeff, ed., *Diaspora and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge. 2000:145).

images of her own representation' (Okediji 2000:148), expanding the horizons of her own world, and transcending the historically and socially imposed limitations of race, gender, and nationality. This is a 're-composition', a 're-membering' of a fragmented self, a remaking of that self through art (Okediji 2000:146).



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

In Okediji's theory of 'metamodernism', which signifies upon and renews the Black Atlantic principles of journeying and diaspora, the self exists on multiple levels and we can – by way of forms of creativity like performance and portraiture – journey through unknown regions, escaping modernist trappings of identity into a rich and multifaceted, historically-connected self, a 'virtual nomad' (Okediji 2000:146). In an era when the global reality of diaspora and the fracturing of the nation-state compels us to move away from dichotomies like inside/outside, native/alien, self/other, straight/gay, citizen/foreigner, and so on (Oguibe 1997:10), Okediji's 'metamodern' artist offers up the promise of a mobile, empowered, self-regenerated subject.

Tradition, History, and the Divinity of Improvisation

If postmodernism has succeeded in subverting European anthropological/colonial maps of history – where the socio-cultural globe was divided along an evolutionary chain in which the "traditional" (the primitive, the naïve, the uncivilised, the non-white) is positioned as a precursor to the "modern" (the enlightened, the contemporary, the advanced, the civilised, the white) – then the postcolonial project of narrating new, differently-shaped histories remains incomplete. Modernity's mapping of the

world generated and was generated by images of an Africa located far in an imagined past, in a primordial state of inertia and simplicity. New art criticism has made some headway in re-figuring African culture as a contemporary phenomenon. But it is, possibly, only a diasporic conception of history that can realize any postcolonial project of exploding the binary opposition of the “traditional” and the “modern” that relegates Africa to a permanently inferior position in the world cultural environment.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 1

Rising from a foundationally mobile worldview the Yoruba notion of history is, of course, a diasporic one. It is elaborated under the concept of *itàn* (Yai 1994:108). Only loosely translatable as ‘history’, *itàn* communicates a multi-tiered, relational notion of the interactivity of historical elements: of the progression and non-linear interrelations of eras and generations, of the individual subject’s multiple presences within the measureless sweep of history, of the diversity of interpretations of the past and of the implications of those interpretations for the future. Under the rubric of *itàn*, history has a ‘discursive and reflexive dimension. As a verb, *itàn* is to ‘discourse on history’, to illuminate it, to unravel the mysteries of the past through discourse (Yai 1994:108-109). In this sense, history is a complex labyrinth of interconnectivities, a subjective maze whose story is always narrated in community, in dialogue with the past, present, and future.

As we have seen, in the Yoruba world, it is the predicament of the artist to always depart, to “difference”, to enter into the diaspora. Within this nomadic consciousness is another layer of meaning that elucidates the Yoruba conception of tradition and its relationship to the present; ‘the tradition/creativity binary opposition is neutralised’ in the play of difference (Yai 1994:113). In the Yoruba concept of history, the past, present, and future are dialectically interrelated, created by each other through this sense of

creative departure. 'An entity worth respecting is that from which we depart or differ' (Yai 1994:113). The artist enacts (honours) the "traditions" of the past by signifying upon – playing with, improvising on, changing – them. The artist at once continues the ways of the past and departs from them by registering her/his own uniqueness. "Tradition" can, in fact, only be expressed, honoured, and revered in the expression of the difference between it and the present. The artist's creative gesture is necessarily always an act of differencing. It cannot be otherwise, for to erase difference would be to stop time. History is moved forward by difference. The ultimate goal: that our creativity should never be allowed to stagnate – neither in its relationship to its past nor its future – and that art (life) should continue to regenerate its original aliveness in the world of the present.

The essential importance of renewal in the expression of the past gives improvisation a special relationship to the divine. This principle is often most clearly discernible in music, but it is active throughout contemporary culture. On the Jazz aesthetic, we remember Ralph Ellison's words: 'true Jazz is an art of individual assertion against the group' (Ellison in Gilroy 1993:79). In the polyvocal arts of the Afro-Atlantic altar, in *batá* drumming in Cuba, in the cutting and mixing techniques of Rap, Hip Hop, and Dub, in Graffiti and in the work of contemporary visual artists like the late

Jean Michel Basquiat, this original Jazz moment – the Diasporic sense of departure and difference – finds expression in one of the central aesthetic principles of postmodern global culture – the break-beat. In all of these cultural forms there is the same basic call-and-response pattern at work. An overall structure and rhythm is set in motion by a community of voices – be it a Jazz orchestra, an array of art objects, or the urban environment of the graffiti writer. Within that rhythm, the individual voice rebels, breaks the beat, weaving its own story around and through an ongoing rhythmic exchange.

This principle of differencing, of the break, takes on yet another formulation in the practice of spiritual possession throughout the Diaspora. This sense of an improvisation that generates meaning is expressed in the concept of *sire*: an 'empowering improvisation', 'an engaged, and engaging, playfulness' that 'embraces and encourages artistic innovations that open spaces for discourse and action' (Drewal 1996:269). Here we witness the interaction of visual art, music, dance, poetry and performance, all coordinated toward the manifestation of the *orisha* in the body of a devotee. Maya Deren suggests repeatedly that, in the possession rituals she experienced and wrote about, it was often the crash of a drum breaking the constant rhythm of the chorus that finally sent one of the servitors into possession, allowing the *loa*

Toward an Insurgent Ancestral Aesthetic

It is possible to imagine that – like Papa Legba, straddling the divide between the living and the divine – the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic mark the crossroads where modernist and postmodernist worlds meet. If we believe the arguments put forth by Gilroy and others that slavery was a foundation of the development of modern society in Europe and America, we may also discern the difference between modernism and postmodernism in the cultural riches of the African Diaspora that were plundered and disbursed globally during the course of the modernist, colonial epoch. Castellanos refers to the Slave Trade as a ‘brutal form of cultural change’ (Castellanos 1994:41). This may hint at the world impact of this massive disbursement not only of humans but also of the cultural forms, art practices, philosophies, and religious/spiritual systems these people carried with them.

Just as Gilroy and many of his postcolonial contemporaries rightly name slavery as both an essential predicament of modernism and the means by which European modernity was achieved (1993), I argue that the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic can be understood and imagined as foundational sources of postmodernism as both theory and global condition. I propose that on a structural, historical – and as importantly, an imagined – level,

postmodernism’s roots are evident in the non-Western aesthetic, spiritual, and philosophical systems the West and its thinkers encounter/ed in the global exchange that was/is colonisation. The wisdom traditions of the African Diaspora – their arts, spiritualities, and philosophies – occupy, in this worldview, a position of central historical importance that has expanded into a visible and compelling presence in contemporary theory, visual art, music, in global culture generally. In short, I suggest that the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic can be recognised as the ancestry of postmodernism. To achieve this, I propose a theoretical framework I call an *insurgent ancestral aesthetic*.

This theory begins with a conceptual trope in which “Africa” – an idea of a geographic reality first coalesced and still today relentlessly employed in the discourses of modern Euro-American academic disciplines fully complicit in the colonial project – is shifted from studied object to active presence. This theory necessarily grapples with a persistent, refracting dilemma: how is it possible to speak of – to rightfully acknowledge and fully respect – the presence of things African in the global interconnectivity that apparently characterises our historical epoch without participating in the taxonomy and hierarchy of cultures and races – in which Africa is figured one way or another as inherently inferior to Europe – that has comprised earlier modernist (and thereby

colonial) theories of the global? An answer to this question might begin by placing Diasporic principles closer to the structural heart of theory. The Diasporic principles I have described above present a compelling argument for the presence of Black Atlantic aesthetics in contemporary global culture. They also provide the frame of analysis and the critical tools with which this theory may be deployed. As has been shown, these principles parallel – or *precede* – Postmodern Theory in striking ways. But an insurgent ancestral aesthetic will depart from postmodernism in equally important ways, primarily in its engagements with the terms of its own name: insurgency, ancestry, and aesthetics.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

An Aesthetic

James Clifford has described artists as a ‘complex fraternity that hinges on non-absolutist ways of practising citizenship’ (Clifford in Oguibe 1997:12). Like the philosophical matrix in which it is grounded, an insurgent ancestral aesthetic maintains an artistic worldview; it honours no rigid separation between art and other disciplines such as science, religion, politics, and so on. On the contrary, the creative arts and other disciplines are regarded as mutually engaged in the creation of lived, perceived realities. As in the Yoruba Diaspora, art and life are inseparable.

The first and most important corollary of this aesthetic worldview is a recognition of the dialectical engagement of fact and fiction. This is the source of the theory’s credibility as well as its openness to critique and interrogation. All theories are fictions, however grounded in fact they may be. All theories are engaged with different levels of subjectivity and are susceptible to the limitations and prejudices that attend such subjectivity. Ultimately, this theory, like any other, emerges from the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, between fact and fiction.

The second corollary of this theory’s aesthetic nature, then, is the celebration of this kind of interactivity, of *multi-mediation*. As an aesthetic theory recognisant of interrelationships between

expressive modes rather than debilitated by the distinctions between disciplines, an insurgent ancestral aesthetic will receive information, facts, images, metaphors, symbols, stories, and histories – the materials of inherited wisdom – from any and all media. Art objects, songs, and dance practices, for example, can be valued and analysed as personal/communal theories about the world. This focus on multi-mediation predisposes the theory toward polyvocal, polysensory metaphors in the telling of histories and social theories.

Gilroy suggests to us that when we move away from cultural discourse that is ‘circumscribed by the idea of rampant, invasive textuality,’ another mode of analysis might take into account such ‘neglected modes of signifying practice as mimesis, gesture, kinesis, and costume’ (1993:78). Indeed, he makes a compelling argument that the cultural artifacts that animate the vast territories of the Black Atlantic can in fact be read as theories, maps of the human world, expressions of lived experiences – such as slavery – that cannot be effectively translated into verbal, textual languages. Following this trajectory, the theoretical dialect of an insurgent ancestral aesthetic would take up the terms of ancestral spiritualities descended from Africa (remembering, however, that I am not proposing a spirituality, but a theory of culture) and its metaphors would be artistic ones.

This theory might speak of genealogies, lineages, inheritance and legacy, but it would also employ sound metaphors in addition to visual and geographic ones: speaking, echoing, reverberating, hearing, listening. We might contend with issues of identity, subjectivity, or agency as Okediji has, in terms of movement: dance, performance, possession, embodiment, and masking. The multi-mediations of contemporary visual art (as in installation art, Pop Art, performance art, and so on) could lend rhythm to what were formerly linear historical narratives. Histories might be “told” not in the terms of narratives at all, but rather as sounds or songs, multi-media patternings informed by the cultural world’s diversity of creative brilliance.

A Renewed Ancestry

Like so many of the social factors – both positive and negative – occasioning mass migration and displacement, the Atlantic Slave Trade forced major transformations in the nature of kinship in African cultures in the “New World”. Castellanos reminds us that, while in Africa religious belief and spiritual association were inherited through the family and linked to blood kinship, after the Middle Passage, ‘this chain of religious transmission based on lineage was severed by the brutal conditions of slavery’ (Castellanos

1996:41). In the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic after slavery, the notion of lineage is still central, but spiritual and artistic kinship can no longer be based solely on a family bloodline. Ancestry has become largely a matter of choice, of adoptions and social contracts. Today, in the wake of that massive forced migration, diaspora appears to be a universal condition as we witness, globally, social structures radically transformed in the movements of social worlds.

All this impels a deconstruction of the notion of biological ancestry, replacing it with a sense of ancestry as polyvalent. With the beginning of genetic engineering of human lives and the fragmentation of family and social structures into global diasporas, traditional concepts of ancestry as a genetic, fixed object transmitted through blood are inadequate. The biological metaphor fails completely to explain the way in which identity is constructed in contemporary society. Racial, biological images of ancestry are the lynchpins of the politics of violent racism and sexism. Today, the nature of ancestry – an inheritance we choose and narrate in the making of ourselves – is technological, historical, artistic, and cultural as much as it is biological, ethnic, or racial. Even our genetic make-up is subject to the various tastes, resources, authorities, and inclinations of those who precede us. Socio-economic power, it seems, is presently being written into the DNA

sequences of the human genome. Ancestry is now malleable at its core. Identity itself is diasporic.

There are moments in Postmodern Theory that might be taken to initiate a renewed theory of ancestry. Foucault began the monumental project of writing history without the notion of linear progress (Sarup 1989:63-64). In Foucault's works on various "histories" (of, for example, sexuality or the asylum), a genealogical analysis allows for the expression and reception of 'local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges' (Sarup 1989:64). A non-linear, expansive – diasporic – sense of lived stories surfaces voices once obscured in the grand narratives of European "History".

According to Foucault, there has been an insurrection of subjugated knowledges, of a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate – naïve knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of scientificity. Foucault uses the term genealogy to refer to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles...against the claims of a unitary body of

theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge (Sarup 1989:64).

Foucault's sense of history and genealogy dovetails with Diasporic notions of ancestry. Africans in the "New World" were, in fact, coerced by the circumstances of slavery into transforming their conceptions of ancestry. They did so precisely in order to retain the inner character of their cultures, and now these cultural inheritances offer us a resilient kind of wisdom as we search for models of ancestry appropriate to contemporary global realities.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

Oguibe suggests that identity might be moving into the spaces of 'becoming' and that art can suggest ways of living in such a global context (1997:12). Gilroy makes a similar assertion: 'Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction...'(1993:102). An insurgent ancestral aesthetic – grounded as it is in an art ethic – might be able to theorise these new realities by offering a transformed notion of personhood by way of Diasporic notions of death, the dead, and the interconnectivities between life and death. In this vision, the individual subject – its presence and historical significance – is the accumulation of the consciousness of all those who came before. When we speak, we speak (by speak, I mean all the actions and speech acts that constitute our various public and private identities) both the past and the future of our selves. In death, we become the effect we have on society; we continue to exist as the echo we have projected into the future. In living a life, the individual creates her/his own death by fashioning that echo. We animate the past and *create* the ancestor we will become, a reverberating effect within a cyclical, diasporic kind of history: the echo of the choices we have made, the powers we have wielded, the stories we have told in the living of our lives.

A Creative Insurgency

A Yoruba proverb: *À ì mo ìbòsí í kẹ, ní kẹ̀ se é jọ*, wailing and shouting, properly orchestrated, can be choreographed (Okediji 1999:44). Gilroy speaks of the 'slave's aural bequest to the future' – a legacy of cultural resistance to horrors too violent to be expressed in words, but which 'reveals much about the incapacity of capitalism to instantly reconfigure the world according to the rhythm of its own insatiable appetites' (1997:23-24). Both Okediji, with his theory of 'metamodernism', and Gilroy, in his assertion that the Black Atlantic's cultural histories offer a 'counter-culture to modernity', take up the wisdom traditions of the African Diaspora in the constructions of new cultural theories of the contemporary global.

The cultural products of the aesthetic philosophical systems of the African Diaspora are inherently resistant; resistant to stagnation, codification, commodification, domination, and erasure. Like Papa Legba, the moment we think we know its name, the art of the Black Atlantic shifts and morphs and – while retaining its inner principles – reminds us that we cannot contain it. Playfulness, the trope, the dialectic, mobility, improvisation, all of these contribute evenly within an aesthetic philosophical system that values the free play of imagination as essential. As in Jazz, there is

an inherent rebelliousness that resists, signifies upon, and transforms the speaker, the interpreter, and the surrounding rhythm and structure. Art is continual play, empowering interdisciplinary improvisation. All of this is a single, massive drive toward the invocation of wisdom and transcendence and the transformation of humanity through expression.

An insurgent ancestral aesthetic is similarly resistant, first, in its strategic positioning relative to other theoretical systems. It is at a structural level a conscious insurgency against – and necessarily partially within – modernist historical narratives and disciplines and their complicity in the colonial project. This theory also incorporates a critique of the unspoken implications made in conventional histories that treat postmodernism as exclusively the descendent of European structuralism, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. The argument here goes something like this: that postmodernism begins to emerge at the birth of the international, the contemporary global, a point at which the exchanges between the West and its colonies meant a blending of ontological, epistemological, artistic and spiritual perspectives, where the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic might be seen as the difference between modernity and postmodernity. We can recognise the telling of this kind of history in work by theorists like Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), but the possibility that African

systems of knowledge might have filtered their worldviews and wisdoms into the body of Western thought as suppressed, obscured undercurrents is a story that has yet to be written. The aesthetics philosophies of the Black Atlantic, originating in a region of the world that was one of the primary objects of study formulating European discourses in anthropology and evolutionary biology, have perhaps no choice but to offer alternate visions, 'post-anthropological' (Gilroy 1997:23) images of humanity and global society.

An insurgent ancestral aesthetic is also resistant in that, aligning itself with postcolonial theory, it will insist on a direct relationship between art and politics. Emphatically pressing for the interconnection of these domains in the narration of new theories of culture, Gilroy insists that '...the arts of the children of slaves give rise to a verdict on the role of art' (1993:38). The divine principles of the dialectic, bricolage, embodiment, mobility, diaspora, and improvisation are all aligned behind that verdict, what Gilroy calls 'the slave sublime' (1993:37).

Art in the Black Atlantic, as an engagement in a set of rich and complex relationships with the *orisha* – the embodiments of the wisdom of the memory of the past – is empowering in a practical and real way; it is held to enliven consciousness and transform thinking. To create is to journey and so to transfigure oneself. The

verdict of the 'slave sublime' is the deep and lasting conviction that creativity is the essence of the universe and that art, properly and honestly engaged, re-memembers a self transcendent of the limitations of the age in which its body resides. Under the rubric of *à se*, this verdict embraces all of the many Diasporic imperatives to fuse artistic power and beauty with the relentless call for justice and ethical living. An insurgent ancestral aesthetic will embrace the verdict of the 'slave sublime', engaging in theory – the theorising of culture – as itself a creative, artistic enterprise. Theories and art works are created, artistic lives lived specifically in the interest of manifesting *à se* in the world around us. To create beauty is to strive for the manifestation of our aspirations to an imagined just world where that which is truly beautiful is always just.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 12

Applications and Possibilities

In terms of the use value of an insurgent ancestral aesthetics as a theory of cultural politics, this system of analysis could be applied to the individual, institutions, cultural products, artistic movements, political and economic structures, and historical narratives. I offer some possibilities here.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 5

Global Systems

Firstly, very generally, I suggest that as we begin to recongise the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic as constitutive elements in postmodernism and in global culture, we may be able to imagine a theoretical framework that is equipped for the task of composing new images of contemporary global systems. Embracing at a core level so many of the defining features of post-industrial society – mobility, mediation, diaspora, interconnectivity, bricolage – the wisdom traditions of the Black Atlantic might offer powerful techniques for imagining agency in the face of the massive complexity of such “systems” as information technology, ethnic conflict, or contemporary art.

Can one imagine, for example, an analysis of neo-colonialism (something which has yet to be adequately achieved) that is an ancestral history of multinational capital? Zaya makes a compelling argument that the ‘constant mobility of multinational capital is the key factor to explain...the global migrations of people and their cultures’, as well as many of the concurrent, problematic characteristics of global society. He suggests that postmodern theory has not only failed to grasp the role of multinational capital, but has gone so far as to obscure it (1997:63).

Perhaps we can detect the ancestry of Microsoft's international police force in the Dutch East India Company, which was both an arm of a political state extending itself geographically and an economic organization seeking profit. In this line of thinking, the multinational corporation appears as a renewed form of political power – a hybrid of nation-state and economic enterprise, released from geographic territories and constantly in motion.

Can one imagine multinational corporations as diasporic nation-states? As multinational capital increasingly exercises this reactivated capacity as political power structure – its ancestry as an extension of the colonial project – it polices identities, bodies, and race and gender relations through the multi-mediations of marketing, advertising, and culture generally.

Most of this regulation proceeds, in fact, within aesthetics: in art, music, television, and film – within creativity itself. This “policing” is not only a function of deliberate policy, but more importantly, it is an effect of bureaucratic systematics, of the sheer motion of meta-structures that have their ancestry in modernist/colonial expressions of race, gender, nationality, and so on. In their organizational structure – their bodies – the systems that define global politics draw their shape from, or echo, the rhythms of past systems. It may be that the best way of imaging –

naming and thus confronting – these systems might be through an aesthetic theory that speaks in the language of the spaces where multinational capital enters our lives as consumers.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

Martin Hall may come close to an ancestral analysis of global systems in his observation that the spread of digital and internet technologies may make use of the same corridors through which Europe's colonisation of Africa progressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hall suggests that such technologies may presently be reinscribing precisely the same

patterns of economic and power that characterised earlier colonial eras (Hall 1999). Implicit in his argument is the notion that technological artifacts, like art objects in African Diasporic aesthetics, contain and transmit patterns of human interaction, power, and meaning across time and space. Similarly, Gilroy sees the 'intricate circulatory network' of Black Atlantic music – and the marketing of its cultural products as commodities – as echoing the patterns of an economic system 'that once trafficked in human beings' (Gilroy 1997:23).



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 2

The End of Race

As a whole, the aesthetic philosophic systems of the African Diaspora constitute a massive mobilisation against European 'raciological' thinking. Indeed, the various populations involved in these art practices and spiritualities – despite the "blackness" of the Black Atlantic – incorporate a vast diversity of culture-makers: countless groups and subgroups on the African continent; black, white, and Latino peoples throughout the Caribbean, Europe and the United States; Latin American and North American people of African descent; people of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americas, and so on. This is an undeniably trans-racial and transnational cultural matrix defying any description according to the modernist strictures of race, ethnicity, or nation.

As such, as we have seen, this system of belief poses – in the face of the post-industrial rise of myriad forms of violent ethnic and racial conflict across the globe – real and compelling alternatives to modernism and postmodernism. The *orisha*, embodiments of essential human principles, have no identity as racialised, gendered beings. They are beyond the mire of any '...unchanging, sovereign racial self' (Gilroy 1993:36) and thrive on 'fluidity, boundarilessness, and centrelessness' (Yai 1994:113).

As the aesthetic philosophies of the African Diaspora filter further into contemporary social thought, images of “race” as “fact” are revealed as the inventions of an early modern Europe. Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts that, after the deconstruction of the logic of European race thinking, the claim to any racial identity is essentially a matter of choice (Appiah 1998). Okediji’s metamodernism threatens nothing less than the ‘apocalypse of race’ (Okediji 2000:16). The artist, in diasporating across multiple selves, transgresses and renders irrelevant modernist structures of racial identity. In Okediji’s world – which is the contemporary Yoruba Diaspora – creativity lends us the capacity to journey through multiple constructions of ourselves and to dissolve the geographical and social boundaries, like race, that divide humanity. An insurgent ancestral aesthetic – inherently resistant and devoted to creativity as the source of the best solutions – continues along this trajectory.

*Cultural Activism and Media Presence:
the Universal Artist in Consumer Society*

An insurgent ancestral aesthetic can offer an idea of cultural reverberation and media presence as ancestry. As cultural producers engaged in a perpetual imaginary project – which, as in the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic as well as in

Appadurai’s estimation, all people are – humans generate a largely unpredictable and untraceable, but real, echo out into the world. In turn, as consumers of culture, we constantly receive media presences: polysensory bits of information, stories and images of other lives, other locales, celebrities, world events, artifacts created by other people in other places. These are present in the life of the individual in very much the same way the *orisha* are felt to be present in ancestral spiritual systems – they have real potential, but their existence is like a mirror reflection and is always partially an image of ourselves.

The *orisha* are created within cultural, artistic dialogue and the nature of their existence is a function of the qualities of our belief. Similarly, Michael Jackson and Madonna are almost universally mistaken for real people, but what we actually make contact with is a crafted, mass-produced image. The meaning of that image or product in our lives is negotiated between what they wish to communicate to us, what we ask for, what we wish to believe in, and how we choose to interpret their presence.

Consider the analysis of art objects in the aesthetics of the Black Atlantic. As Thompson says of the altar, the symbolic and spiritual richness of the work is ‘diminished if it is limited to single interpretation’ (1993:3). Okeke discusses Olu Oguibe’s Masquerade Theory in which Oguibe uses the African masquerade – epitomised

in the Igbo Ijele mask – as a figure for art and its interpretation: art is in motion, it is a performance that ‘cannot be fully appreciated from one position’, it must be seen and analysed through a ‘multiplicity of frames’ (1996:92). Art objects and their makers are active in multiple communities of meaning production and interpretation, not least of all in economic/financial worlds as commodities. The complexities of cultural objects and the people who create and consume them cannot be understood from one angle, for that would imply a distinct passiveness on the part of the subject in other realms of analysis. Even in the sacred arts of the altar, consumerism comes importantly into play; the creation and maintenance of devotional altars to the *orisha* is ‘both liberated and limited by the consumer experience and socioeconomic pressure in the marketplace’ (Brown 1996:105).

This ‘multiplicity of frames’ projects an unflinchingly activist conception of the subject as participant in global culture, as both a producer and consumer in the web of global cultural interactivity. In an insurgent ancestral aesthetic, the distinctions between art theory, cultural studies, politics, and economics bleed into one another in a way that might generate possibilities for agency. The difference between artist and consumer – culture-producer and culture-consumer – dissolves and each individual subject appears as a participant in an enormous tapestry of

interactivity, creativity, and productivity. The complex ways in which creativities are taken up in the assertion of institutional power, the fractal formations of groups of humans, and the construction of individual identities are all aesthetic in nature. They are all – as Appadurai suggests – the work of the imagination.



Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2001

PART TWO: Practice

The Eternal Carnival

The Body Remixed in Painting and Sculpture



Themes

The proposition of an “insurgent ancestral aesthetic” I offer in Part One serves two functions. Firstly, it is an intervention within the realm of theory. As such, it is grounded in academic research into the aesthetic philosophies of the Black Atlantic and should be understood from that perspective. Secondly, specifically for the purposes of this section of the dissertation, my theoretical research contextualises the creative work. It provides the framework I use to assess my artwork and organises the language I use to put words to its meaning.

The creative work is presented in two interconnected formal areas: sculptural painting and lightworks. I have produced all of this work at the crossroads where drawing, painting, sculpture, and theory interact. The artwork culminates in the central piece of the dissertation: a series of lightworks entitled *The Eternal Carnival*, which most successfully embodies the concepts and principles explored in this dissertation. In terms of a linear narrative, the paintings can effectively be seen as precursors to the lightworks; but as a whole my work can also be seen in terms of a dialogue between interactive forms of expression.

My artwork begins with the improvised figurative gesture. The drawn, painted, written, and sculpted figure is the original

pallet and the only canvas. It is where all of my thoughts take form and where I manifest my best hopes, my strangest fantasies, and my deepest fears. Across the whole of the work, the human form is the expression of an imagined/real collective sense of the universal manifest as emotional tone: joy, pain, terror, anxiety, restlessness, confusion, loneliness, transcendence. The art attempts to summon a sense – a sensual experience – of the strivings of the human spirit contained in the flesh, of a body that is active – like a human life and like the *orisha* – on multiple simultaneous levels.

It is, first, of crucial importance that a work provides a source of visual pleasure. Under the rubric of *àṣe*, I recognise the demands of various levels of artistic character: technical fluency, innovation and creativity, playfulness and improvisation, completeness, insight, aliveness, and durability.²³ *Àṣe* unifies form with content across a wide spread of standards of beauty and morality. This philosophic matrix, as we have seen, can be crudely reduced to the simple formula: inner beauty generates outer radiance. Thus, one of the central goals of my artwork is the achievement of an interconnectivity between form and content that

²³ In Yoruba, they are, respectively: *onà*, *àrà*, *eré*, *pípé*, *ojú-imí*, *ìdàhùn*, and *tító*. These are the qualities by which a work of art is assessed in Yoruba aesthetics as compiled by H. Drewal, ‘Introduction: Yoruba Art and Life as Journeys’ in Abiodun, R., Drewal, H., & Pemberton, J., eds. *The Yoruba Artist* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1994:193-200).

provokes a sense of presence, a felt remembrance of humanity reflected through the visible – and hopefully beautiful – work of art. Whether the content of a particular work is joyful or terrifying, it is the expression of human-ness that provides the pleasures that attends the narrowing of the unbridgeable chasm between oneself and the world. If the content of my work is not compelling, the visual beauty of it will fall short of what I intend and if the work is not beautifully executed, it will fail to communicate anything more than its own physical presence.



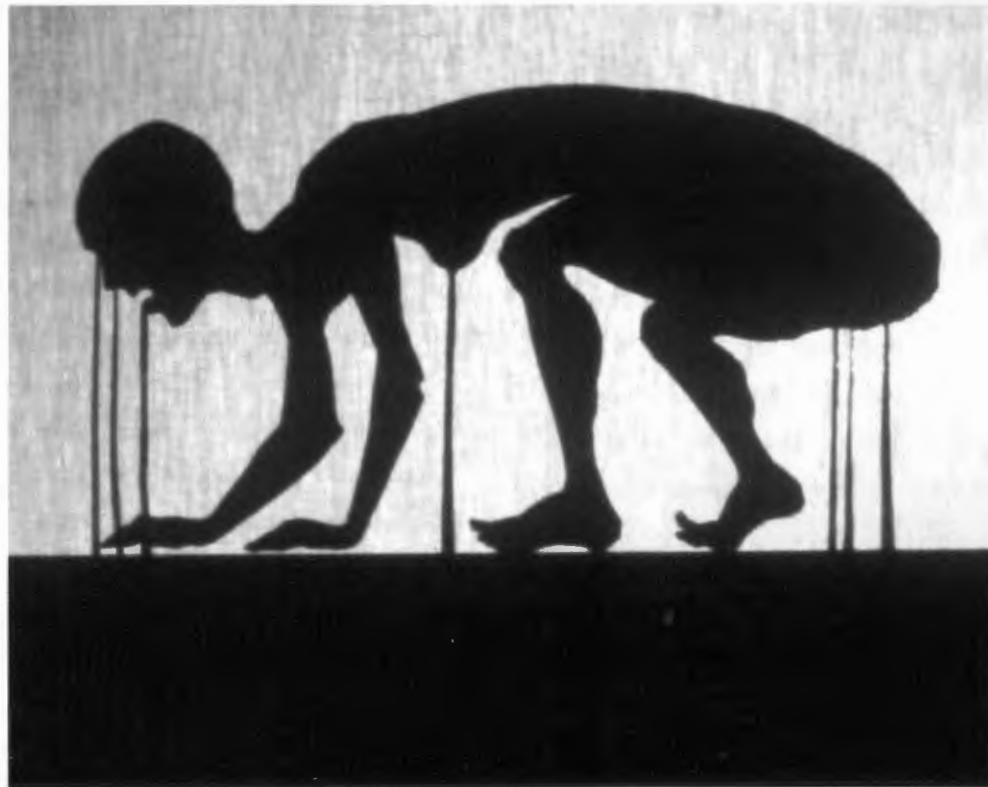
Charcoal on paper, from sketchbook, 2000

It is within improvisation that my artwork seeks to achieve this playful sense of the body. All of the art works presented in my dissertation – the drawings and paintings as well as the lightworks – are improvised. I do not approach a work planning to illustrate a particular idea or concept; I never begin with a clear image of the final product. As I craft the work, its identity emerges, its emotional tones develop, and its level of intentionality grows. Yet as the content becomes clear and this intentionality grows, the work's aliveness diffuses and so I play a series of tricks to disrupt – or break – the patterns revealing themselves. In this way I undermine the consolidation of fixed meaning, adding layers of complexity in terms of texture, line, color, depth, and narrative content – a history. In its finished form, the work is an accumulation of incomplete utterances and disrupted rhythms.

This break-beat aesthetic surfaces a story of remixed bodies. The figurative forms contain the unity of their past, present, and future as well as the multiple disruptions of that continuity. There is a sense of restlessness and anxiety, a sense of never being finished. The work must play on the tension between order and chaos – or, as in the shadow works, between the body and the defiance of the body's material logic – to achieve a suspension of disbelief. In this way, improvisation reveals something of the unseen, the unspoken, and the unconscious. The

work must not be fully explainable because such resolution would mean the end of the generative exchange between art and the theorising of it. The mystery of the contrast between the arbitrary

and the intentional reminds us that there is more to learn and more to see and that, when improvisation reveals impulsivity, we have a momentary glimpse of honesty and – possibly, hopefully – divinity.



Detail, *The Cosmic Tantrum*, Canvas 1

Painting: the Body as a 'Harlequin Robe'

Mine is a mixed media, semi-sculptural approach to painting. I begin by laying down a thin layer of plaster, which provides a reactive surface. It can be worked in many ways but responds unpredictably, contributing a formal level to the tension between patterning and the breaking of patterns. The plaster surface is absorbent and can be scoured and scratched, sometimes cracking or chipping off. As the painting develops, layers are scraped off to expose new elements. The interaction of different materials places limitations on the level of control I can assert on the painting as I work it, preserving randomness as a permanent element in the process. Colors and tones appear partially as a matter of accident as I apply a series of washes across the entire canvas. Over time, I develop rich textures and patterns by adding and removing layers of material. The painting process is reductive as well as additive. The figure emerges out of a layering of additions and excavations, creations and destructions.

My approach to painting, then, formally integrates the break-beat aesthetic. This aesthetic is particularly evident in the treatment of the figure in my drawing style, which visibly registers the influence of the writing/drawing of illiterate children. In both their playfulness and their sense of desperation, my figures are

woven of half-legible words blended into drawn gestures, invoking a sense of a blurred boundary between writing and drawing. Similarly, the presence of a graffiti "writing" sensibility is readily observable.

Also apparent in my "style" are the inheritances of various European and American modes of expressionism: Egon Schiele's treatment of the figure (imagining Schiele's figuration as a precursor to expressionism); the German Expressionists; the impulsiveness of the Abstract Expressionists, especially De Kooning; the neo-expressionist materialism of Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, and Anton Tapies.

Olabiyi Yai describes Yoruba culture as 'a perfect Harlequin robe' (1994:112). In my painting, this is how I activate and evoke the human form. Beginning with the improvised figurative gesture, I develop each painting into a specific, momentary sense of the body. They are loosely titled – only to distinguish one from another – because they are intended as sensibilities, songs about the body, not as illustrations of specific realities. The particular sensation communicated in each painting is generated by the interplay of matter, line, color, and the illusion of pictorial space toward a formal goal -- an expressive visual language that travels somewhere in the borderland between writing, drawing, and speaking. The blurring of writing and drawing generates a

sense of partial utterances, lending a 'sound' to the painting. Partially legible "written" elements provoke incomplete, unfulfilled speech-acts in the viewer – the painting wants to be read, but cannot be heard because its words are only partially discernible. This interplay of the drawn, the written, and the (un)spoken contributes to an overall sense of an anxious, journeying bodily presence. The paintings search for an image of the body as written, a story we narrate over time – the body is fractured and fragmented but active on multiple simultaneous levels. It is disrupted and partial, yet somehow unified across space and time.

It is through the interactions of matter and image, order and chaos, improvisation and intentionality, writing and drawing that, in my paintings, the body becomes Yai's 'Harlequin robe.' In this sensibility, perhaps, the "soul" is "clothed" in a material form – a living body – that records all that has befallen it: the places it has been, the people it has loved, the pains and ecstasies it has known. The body is a tableau, a record, and the histories of its journeys are written across its flesh.

Because the paintings deal in bodily sensation, they remain open to the succession of contexts of reception and interpretation; they will not settle on a precise meaning. Meaning is generated, most importantly, in the exchange between my own improvisations and intentions and the interpretations of a collectivity of viewers.

The real, valuable content rises in that exchange. I cannot know or speak about the meaning of the work outside of how it is received by others. Nonetheless, some additional notations on the individual works accompany the plates in the final section.



Torso; plaster, oil, acrylic, charcoal on canvas;
122 x 182 cm; October 2000

Lightworks: *The Eternal Carnival*

It was after a period of work in found object sculpture – in which the play of light through arrangements of objects became a vital creative device – that I began to work in shadow and silhouette. After a long period of work in this medium, I have arrived at a distinct style of figuration and a particular kind of narrativity specific to the lightworks. Both of these represent major shifts I have made in my work in the past two years.

The lightworks continue and expand the themes I have explored in my paintings: the improvisational remixing of the body; impulsivity and disruption in the expression of the human form; the centrality of the break; the figure as a diasporating, emotionally-charged matrix; meaning as emergent in a play of different interpretations. In *The Eternal Carnival* I have infused these themes with greater complexity in a kind of narrativity that marks a critical departure from the emotional abstractions of the paintings.

In these works, the play of the absence and presence of light sets up a series of compelling displacements. Shadow is not light, that force which governs absolutely our perception of the world around us. It is light's absence. Shadow is not the object whose shape it describes. It is not matter at all. It is an echo, an impression within the motion of light nanoseconds after the event

– energy striking matter – that makes the world available to us as sensory material. There is a displacement in the casting of a shadow, as if one is again an infant grasping at object constancy. My shadow is not me; it is an echo of what I used to be and a projection of my body into space. It follows me everywhere, reminding me that I not only *am*, but I also *was* and I *will be*. Shadow stretches the self across space and time.

In the wisdom traditions of the Black Atlantic, this is how the dead are felt to be present. In Vodoun, for example, the language used to speak about the ancestors makes frequent and elaborate use of metaphors of twins, mirror reflection, inversion, and shadow. Very generally, my shadow work is given to the task of manifesting *senses* of the diversity of presences and principles embodied in the ancestral characters of the Black Atlantic. An earlier light installation – a prototype of the current work entitled *The Cosmic Tantrum*, from which I drew the title and central theme of this dissertation – presented images of two important *orisha*: the trickster guardian of the crossroads, Papa Legba, and Erzulie, the goddess of love and sorrow. In the shadow works, I am not trying to illustrate the *orisha*, for that would presume that they could be reduced to mere images. Rather, I am signifying on the *orisha* as spiritual characters, artistic principles, psychological presences, and

theoretical figures; I am seeking to honour, engage in, and extend their complexity and openness.

This project – of exploring ways to embody the principles of the *orisha* in light and shadow – culminates in *The Eternal Carnival*. *The Eternal Carnival* is a suite of fourteen backlit canvas “tapestries” It is composed of deliberately simple materials: canvas, paper, and light sources. Formally, the tapestries hang like flags or banners, loosely reinforced by wooden supports. In this regard, they may remind one of an important Black Atlantic art form – the flag altar. Throughout the Black Atlantic, banners and flags are used as expressive devices in devotional spaces, especially in the flag altars of the Saamaka and other maroon cultures in Suriname (Thompson 1993:133-135).

Each tapestry interacts with – but *does not* illustrate – stories, characters, and principles from the Black Atlantic. The rendering of the forms in light is reminiscent of another important Black Atlantic art practice – the silhouetted metalworks of Haiti, as epitomised Georges Liautaud’s art (Morris 1995:383-395). The imagery in the fourteen tapestries is unified by a set of visual themes: water and wetness, mirroring and inversion, the interplay between multiple (real and imagined) light sources and the shadows they cast, and successions of dramatic compositional “breaks”.

The Eternal Carnival plays with the mysterious indeterminacy of shadow through a series of inversions, reflections, and refractions. We see shadows of shadows, shadows casting their reflections in mirrors, the reflection of a shadow of a shadow, and so on. Generally, this communicates a sense of the existential presence of the dead in our lives: always shifting, never static, each presence a function of its opposite in the divine dialectical mirroring.

The viewer’s own position is drawn into this mirroring. In many of tapestries, it appears that there is a light source behind the viewer casting her/his own shadow into the picture plane, into an ambiguous space where s/he sees this projection not as her/his own image, but something different – a strange, possibly familiar character. Is this an aspect of the viewer? Or is it the character in the tapestry who is casting us as its shadow? Perhaps we are an inversion, on this side of the picture plane, of the presence we see before us. Certainly, we project an aspect of ourselves into the work as we apprehend and attempt to make sense of it.

More important than any literal translation of the meaning of the imagery, then, is my intention that the work’s most powerful capacity is in how it is received and interpreted. The viewer need not be familiar with the *orisha* or the principles they embody. Rather, the meaning of the work grows richer in dialogue. The

imagery offers an open matrix, a mandala-like interplay of figurations, symbols, and metaphors that generates a communal interpretive narrativity. The principles of the Black Atlantic diffuse through that play as felt – but not necessarily literally translated – principles. In this way, the open matrix of the imagery in *The Eternal Carnival* surfaces senses of the personal and the universal: of birth and death, of mobility across dimensions and territories, of memories and icons, of power plays and emotional, spiritual, and psychological relationships.

The mysteries of the imagery in the tapestries – the figures' strange defiance of the logic of the body; the characters' familiar yet bizarre personalities; the shifts in emotional tone; the indeterminacy of light sources within the picture plane; the uncertain relationships between objects, their shadows, and their reflections – mirror the fluid commerce of narration and interpretation generated by *The Eternal Carnival*. The participants in this creative exchange – the viewers – are compelled to narrate a story about the relationships and events imaged in the tapestries and to attempt to fix themselves within that story. They are invited to participate – or reminded of their participation – in the telling of the story of an endless carnival of beauty and terror on the other side of our mirror reflection.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 8

CONCLUSION

Levels of the Devil's Company



Levels of the Devil's Company

As far as I am told and as far as I am able to tell, my ancestors have remained unheard for many generations and so they do not speak.

Half-lost somewhere in a vast diaspora of European immigration to the New World is a story, marketed relentlessly in the images of the media and the state, of an endless departure and a constant arrival. We depart fleeing an abstract poverty and arrive in an abstracted landscape to occupy a space cleared of its original inhabitants, left there by “god” for “us”. It was upon this landscape that we laboured to lose our ethnicity, strove to become whiter than working class, whiter than Irish, purely American. In the modernist biological terms of a family bloodline, my ancestors have been erased. They are silent. In the space of their silence, I claim as my ancestral legacy that which has been left behind – a global history of white, male, heterosexual violence. I demand to remain in conversation with that legacy.

I also claim a global cultural inheritance that is, in its varied and shifting forms of creative resistance, a contemporary antidote to my/our history of violent racism, heterosexism, and spiritual disconnection. In the liberating absence of and, more importantly, against any notion of a fixed, racialised, and gendered ancestry, I – with many others working the cultural field today – position myself

within a conversational process in which I elaborate a pastiche momentary/historical identity and attempt a seriously playful resistance to the inherited structures of modernism and colonialism. This serious play²⁴ of identity and culture is informed by all sorts of influences and presences, but is grounded most importantly in my relationships with the wisdom traditions of the African Diaspora. It is composed of real and imagined – consciously chosen – ancestral materials available to in the global cultural marketplace. Pieced together under the rich concept of *à se*, this conceptual assemblage affords me, by way of a special art historical memory, a creative way to unify concerns with beauty and social responsibility and to understand myself as an artist, an activist, and the inheritor of the privileges of a silent racist legacy. Like its influences it is unabashedly personal, widely inclusive, politicised in its practicality, and grounded in a particular perception of the ordinary, a common sense dictating that anything, *every thing* can be seen to contain meaning. It is committed to the dialogic play of cultural discourse as a celebration of life and a resistance to that which constrains the expressions of life.

But in my historical position and in this work, I metaphorically consort with the devil on multiple levels: I am the

²⁴ I first encountered the concept of ‘serious play’ in James Clifford’s *Writing Culture* (London: University of California Press. 1986).

bio-racial legatee of the “white devil” and his ongoing project of economic domination; I court, in my belief in the ancestral aesthetic systems of the African Diaspora, Christianity’s “black devil” embodied in the spirits of the dead (as in the Black Atlantic spirit *Papa Legba* who is often equated within Christianity with Satan, and with whom I very closely identify); and I pursue a career in which I inevitably cash in on white male privilege in the marketing of my product – art.

This system of intercultural understanding, which I have called an insurgent ancestral aesthetic, begins with a critically important awareness that appropriation has been and remains among the most devastating techniques of colonisation as well as the most dynamic and successful strategies of creativity and intercultural survival. The weight of history and the imperatives it impresses upon us – as individuals, as interdependent organisms who remember, create, feel, and interact with countless refracting waves of possible pasts and futures – are so powerful that it remains entirely possible, in the processes I have described here, that I will travel along a road that leads back toward a patronising ethnographic vision of the essentially “foreign” cultures for which I have professed such a sound affinity and deep respect. In doing so,

I might easily reinscribe precisely those histories I wish to resist²⁵. Pairing two pivotal awarenesses – one, in which I discard suspect notions of ethno-cultural authenticity and original authorship, the other in which I openly recognise that I am sampling, signifying on, appropriating from cultures exterior to my own – appears to be the best insurance against that possibility.

It is to be hoped that history is not immovable, and that within these awarenesses, I – and we – might negotiate out of the conflictual and painful relationships that so often dominate intercultural contact a celebration of the interweaving of human creativity as the source of art, justice, and ultimately, the self. Within an awareness of the universal practice and cultural fact of appropriation, through which I take up conversations with a rich array of influences and presences, this ‘metamodern’ belief system embraces its own arbitrariness and its own constructed-ness, celebrating the truth that we all invent and narrate our own sensual, perceptual reality, that we do so in motion over time, and that the product is never finished and never fully true.²⁶

²⁵ I thank Professor Martin Hall, of the University of Cape Town, for distilling the more personal issues at stake in my research and illuminating them for me.

²⁶ I am grateful to Moyo Okediji for his idea of a ‘metamodern’ journey, which he discusses in ‘Black Skin, White Kins’ in N. Mirzoeff, ed., *Diaspora and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge. 2000:143-162).

In this – in my theoretical work as well as in my artwork – I return to improvisation as an essential activity. In total, my artwork expresses hope for a pre-rational impulsivity that has, if I am not entirely blinded by a lack of self-awareness, no choice but to be honest. To the extent that I still assert, embrace, and benefit from and a colonising gaze on the cultural others I seek out and encounter, the free play of imagination will surface those impulses and manifest them as available, workable material. In a visible state they are negotiable, namable, changeable. My work presumes that creativity can, and will, throw down into our view the ways in which we fail to fulfill our aspirations to genuine connection across the anguished innumerable divisions of history.

My artwork expresses the hope that we might allow ourselves to hear the sound – and thus sense the wisdom – of the stories of forgotten and suppressed voices: the cosmic tantrum. Where we are not honest in our moral drive toward justice, it is hoped, we may not experience the divine and do not fully succeed in knowing beauty. A creative call and response between impulse and honesty can in theory and does in practice manifest the song we refuse to hear, the image we choose not to embrace, the rage of forgotten history that begs, demands, hopes, and advises that we listen.



Detail, *The Eternal Carnival*, Tapestry 6

PLATES

Paintings and *The Eternal Carnival*

Torso

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

104 x 104 cm

May 2000

This is an anxious reading of the body as text. The interweaving of scraped and drawn lines with fractal texturing and subtle tonalities forms a web-like matrix out of which the figure emerges. The composition of this painting signifies on fashion photography and advertising images of the body in which the torso is severed from the head and limbs. Are we gazing into the gut of this body? Has the artist been digging and scratching into its heart, attempting to excavate something out of its abdomen? Does the viewer participate in this?



Double Portrait

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

123 x 123 cm

September 2000

The interlaced formal elements in this portrait communicate a sense of a shifting presence. Is this a single person at several different moments in time? Or is it several different people occupying the same space, moments apart, as on a busy city sidewalk? The wide-open eyes – a device common in both the paintings and lightworks reminiscent of Yoruba Diasporic sculpture and painting – gaze off in different directions, implying a distortion in the pictorial plane and posing questions like: where is this person looking? What is s/he surrounded by? The shifting of the figure's gaze mirrors our own eyes as they wander along the contours of the painting.



Portrait

Plaster, acrylic, oil, pencil on canvas

100 x 100 cm

September 2000

This piece plays with a partial, momentary presence. The “sketches” are carved into the dry texture of the surface, as if this portrait has been excavated from beneath. The scraped and scratched line work hints subtly at the skeletal structures and contours of a face, communicating a sense of the fragmentary and ephemeral. The wide-open eyes may, as in many of the paintings, indicate awareness or wisdom, but in this piece they also take on a more anxious tone.



Figure

Pollyfilla, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

100 x 100 cm

November 2000

Is this quasi-skeletal figure playing with a doll? Is it making the body or claiming it? Could this be Death crafting the form of the memory of a person after they have died? The importance of the break-beat graffiti aesthetic plays out strongly both in the line work and composition of this painting. Again, there are partially legible utterances, as if a polyphony of voices converses around the event we are witnessing. The scale of the figure shifts across the picture plane, far from the viewer in some places, close to us in others.



Torso and Head

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

165 x 165 cm

April 2001

The full frontal stance, common in the paintings and drawings, generates a sense of the body as a surface receiving the inscriptions of all it has experienced. The figure's upward stare is also a frequent device seen in the lightworks. The face begins to disappear at the edge of the picture plane, while at the bottom the form disembodies and fades out, as if submerging in water. A sense of wetness unifies the composition, as if the body is floating, or receiving and transmitting moisture. We may be reminded here of the Black Atlantic aesthetic in which the ancestors are imagined to be wet; they reside beneath the ocean and rain is the form of their tears of joy and sorrow.



Portrait 3

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

64 x 100 cm

June 2001

This piece returns to an anxious style of portraiture. Does the wide-open stare communicate sentience and wisdom or fear and hyper-vigilance? The bright warm tones, especially on the lips, intimate that we may be gazing into a mirror at a face heavily laden with thick layers of lipstick and makeup. The fractured, fragmented rendering and the difference between the expressions of the eyes leave the emotional tone of this portrait uncomfortably inconclusive.



Reclining Figure

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

190 x 137 cm

September 2001

The status of this figure is a matter of question: is it sleeping, ailing, floating, or dead? The head seems to disappear as it swings back behind the shoulders and the hands and feet hang low, weighing the body down. The heavy forms surrounding the figure convey a sense of envelopment, as if it may be sinking, crisscrossed by layers of the partial words and bodies of others. Again, the graffiti aesthetic is active here.



Torso and Head

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

102 x 102 cm

August 2001

A figure gazes downward, but above its shoulders another face rises, perhaps staring at the viewer. This painting brings the contrast between matter and image to high relief. The inner portions of the body reveal subtle plays of colour where the plaster has been completely removed, while the thick layers of material form a skeletal exterior.



Figure

Plaster, oil, pencil on canvas

150 x 150 cm

September 2001

There is a light touch to this painting and a focus on subtle textures, amounting to a sense of a body barely there. The reliance mainly on contour for the rendering of the figure insists again that writing and drawing are one and the same. A body is a sketch, a life is a moment. The positioning and tensions of the figure relate closely to renderings of the human form in the lightworks.



Portrait

Plaster, acrylic, oil, charcoal on canvas

104 x 104 cm

October 2001

This painting also relies heavily on contour, again communicating a transient and anxious tone. It is a portrait, but the forms of the face shift and cross over one another, leaving the expression and the exact location of the form mysterious. As in other portraits, the eyes gaze off in different directions. And like the other paintings, the criss-cross “writing” style conveys energy and uncertainty, sound and silence.



*The Eternal Carnival*¹

Tapestry 1

This piece evokes an interplay of real and imagined selves. Who is casting the shadow, the viewer or the one-legged boy? Do the events take place inside a room or in an alley between buildings? In the figure of the lame boy with the cane, this image signifies on Babaluaye, the Black Atlantic figure of sickness and healing (Thompson 1993:216-221). Does the figure in the doorway mock the boy's lameness, celebrate the hope of regeneration, or dance the memory of a missing limb?



¹ For all fourteen works in *The Eternal Carnival*: canvas, paper, wood, and light source; 140 x 250 cm; completed Winter 2001.

The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 2

This image signifies on Papa Ghede, the Vodoun loa of sex, fertility, and death. With his top hat, black overcoat, cane, and dark sunglasses, He watches over the universe with His bulging eyes and satisfies His voracious appetite, eternally consuming and recreating life (Deren 1953:108). In these images, He subdivides himself, diasporating into multiple aspects. In one of His manifestations we see that He is not only fertile, but hermaphroditic as well.



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 3

Remembering that in Diasporic sensibility, the ancestors are imagined to be wet, returning to us from beneath the sea, we may see here an image of the gods raining their tears into the ocean. She stands on the banks of a body of water. Is this woman bathing in Her own tears? Is She weeping for the inverted figure above who has been hung by the neck? Is She consuming its death? Or is She transforming sorrow into the rains of new life?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 4

This piece plays with the character, Erzulie, the Black Atlantic figure who governs love, beauty, and sorrow. In this image, mirrors surround Her as She grooms herself delicately. Is She a queen? A celebrity? A fashion model? A prostitute? In mirror reflections we see Her multiple avatars: violent, self-destructive, luxuriating in wealth and sensuality, weeping the tears of a sad and lonely old woman.



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 5

Suspended above a body of water or a dark mirror's surface, we witness a moment of creation. Perhaps this is the first splitting of a cell, the differentiation of some primordial unity into male and female. The figures split again, into a set of three – male, female, and child – and the succession of creativity and differentiation proceeds. Who controls it? Is it a puppeteer we see above? Does she laugh or cry? Is the figure at bottom, hanging by its umbilical cord, stricken with terror or ecstasy?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 6

This image plays with the energetic sensibilities of Ogún, the Diasporic god of iron, war, strength, masculine virility, resistance, and justice. He is a clearer of pathways, and here we see manifestations of His powers in the varied forms of a warrior, a three-legged dancer, and a wealthy industrialist. The weapons generate arms and hands, in turn offering a mirror reflection: consciousness? Self-awareness? The double-edged self-destructiveness of violence in the image of an insane king?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 7

In this piece we have a sense of the sacred trickster. Perhaps it is Papa Legba's multiple bodies that expand into a monstrous eating machine, destroying and consuming life. But the shadow of the uprooted tree remains and Legba's terrible power provokes a new trick: does another mirroring of his divine presence enable survival?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 8

Who is the puppet and who is the puppeteer? The swinging of the strings conveys a sense of precarious perpetual motion, while the twists and turns of the figures echo one another. The body of the larger puppeteer might fit with that of the man swinging below. The table on which the figure sits is reproduced exactly on the back of that man. Who is the presence floating in the waters below?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 9

This might remind one of Ben Okri's story of the god of the road, whose hunger is so great that he must consume all that comes his way. Still unsatisfied, he continues until he has eaten himself and his body seeps into the earth (Okri 1992:258-261). From the form of this self-consuming monster a shadow is cast. Is this a regeneration, the mirror reflection of a monster's destructiveness in some strange and endless cycle?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 10

A series of mirrored semi-circular elements echoes vertically through the bowls of water, the woman, and her reflection, feeding its movement into the body of a tree. In its sparse branches might be Damballah, the Black Atlantic rainbow serpent, whose body cycles across the sky and plunges into the ocean below, carrying the fertile momentum of water through countless dimensions (Deren 1953:115-116). Is this woman weeping, praying, cleansing herself? Or is She the origin of the reverberations that circle around her?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 11

Two women kneel down to a surface of water or glass, mirroring and embracing each other. This image links with Maya Deren's description of a ceremony honouring the Vodoun god of the ocean, Agwé (Deren 1953:129). One twin weeps, catching her tears in her hands, while the other lifts a palm full of water to her lips to drink of her sister's sadness. Together their arms reach across the divide, down into a realm below, offering something: sacrifice? Payment? Condolence? Is this a gift for the dead? A contribution to a feast about to begin?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 12

Human and animal forms blend and intertwine in the spinning of a divine carousel. Is it a god or a monster – horns becoming hands sprouting from its head – whose many arms make the playful cycle move? Its wide-open eyes stare into the spaces above, while the creatures in its control form a web of bodies. Is it light or centrifugal force that transforms their shadows into the images of new beings cast out across the ground?



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 13

In one Black Atlantic myth of origins, god commissions the divine sculptor, Àjàlá, to sculpt the head of the first human. His sacred works are chosen from his studio by those about to be born. Àjàlá's sculpted heads, in life, become the soul's character and destiny. But though his skills are limitless works of divine beauty, Àjàlá is a drunkard and sometimes creates faulty heads. He is a debtor as well and often cannot be found to show the unborn which of his works, in life, will bring the most favourable fate.



The Eternal Carnival

Tapestry 14

A man and a woman are bound together. Does this woman become a tree at the side of the water, insuring that he will not drown in his own reflection? Or will she drown as the waters rise? These images suggest the wedded gods of the ocean, Agwé and Yemayá, with their images reflecting endlessly in the deep waters, and the lives of their descendants spinning in their hands.



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