

How to Disappear: Disidentification and biomythography as tools for queering and querying oppressive identity politics

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract

In this paper I endeavor to chart the trajectory through my Practice as Research process into, and later development of, what eventually became a performance and literary work entitled *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations*. The paper details in the first part, *Modes of Disidentification*, the practices of three black, interdisciplinary artists: Todd Gray, Sethembile Msezane and Athi-Patra Ruga operating at different intersections of black identity and how their practices exemplify different possibilities for disidentification in creative practice. Using the framework of queer cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz' *Disidentifications* (1984) as a theoretical base, I endeavor to explore the different techniques that these artists use in response, retaliation and, possibly, congruence to the politics of representation¹. In order to elucidate and experiment with these techniques I employ a Practice as Research methodology that I unpack in the second half of the paper, *Biomythography, critical fabulation and disidentification in Practice*. In *Biomythography, critical fabulation and disidentification in practice* I engage the performance works I created during my masters in Theatre and Performance, namely *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations* and *icarus descent* and illustrate how the theory of disidentification can be performed utilizing the techniques of biomythography (Lorde, 1982) and critical fabulation (Hartman, 2008) that gesture towards a complication of rigid identity theory. Underpinning this research is the desire to explore artistic techniques that complicate rigid, categorical identity theory and practices in the hope that these techniques can serve towards alternatives to and liberation from the social, categorical identity model inherited in Southern Africa through the colonial systems of identity based categorization.

¹ By "politics of representation" I mean the discourse which suggests that the representation of oppressed people - in the public sphere (media, politics etc) and otherwise- provides a mechanism for the liberation of oppressed people (Vaid-Menon, 2014)

Introduction: Ain't I a [hu]man?

In 'social contract theory' society is theorized to be organized by a series of contracts between individuals and governing entities, most particularly in the way of politics and morality. The foundations of this philosophical school of thought are credited to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacque Rousseau. Expressions of this theory in the contemporary era are devices such as the law: the framework that mediates the relationship between citizens and the state. The state provides the infrastructure within which citizens can live and citizens in return pay taxes to the state. The philosophical underpinnings of social contract theory in its preliminary iterations is the shared commonality of humans and was used to theorize why, as Rousseau put it, "Man is born free; and [yet] everywhere he is in chains." (1762 trans. 1782). However, contemporary criticisms of social contract theory posit that the philosophical underpinnings of the theory do not conceive of systems of oppression wherein the category of "human" and the resultant claims (to rights, to liberty, to life) that the human category allows is effectively reserved for particular people of a particular identity. In response to the limitations of contract theory Carole Pateman, author of *The Sexual Contract*, rebuts,

"In contract theory universal freedom is always a hypothesis, a story, a political fiction. Contract always generates political right in the forms of domination and subordination."
(1988: 8)

In *The Racial Contract* Charles Mills writes, "White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today" (1999: 1). Mills further explicates that in the historical construction of systems of order and governance- from aristocracy to libertarianism; democracy to absolutism- white supremacy receives little serious inquiry as providing the philosophical underpinnings for the advent of the systems of governance that, in myriad manifestations, typify the age of modernity, namely: colonialism and capitalism. Mills argues that where mainstream (read: white) philosophical thought is concerned with issues of justice and injustice in the abstract, the vast majority of black and indigenous political thought the world over is concerned with these self-same issues through the lenses of the concrete realities

and consequences brought about by imperialism, colonialism, white settlement, apartheid, slavery and systems of that ilk. By extension, systems of governance constructed from the perspective of white political thought necessarily exclude the lived realities of black and indigenous people. An example of this would be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the response from the United Nations General Assembly after the atrocities of World War II. The declaration is a non-legally binding document of thirty articles that expounds on the various rights and fundamental liberties that should be available to “men and women”² the world over without discrimination. The Declaration can be understood as an attempt at configuring a recalibrated social contract after the mass violences against humanity conducted during the second world war and was thus adopted on the 10th of December 1948. 1948 also represents a seminal moment in the history of South Africa as this was the year Apartheid became officially recognised as legal doctrine. It may (or may not) then come as a surprise to find that South Africa, then the Union of South Africa, was a signatory on the Declaration, forming part of the original 51 member states of the United Nations (Un.org, 2018). It may also be worth clarifying here who drafted the Declaration: Dr Charles Malik of Lebanon, Alexandre Bogomolov of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Dr Peng-chun Chang of China, René Cassin of France, Eleanor Roosevelt of the United States of America, Charles Dukes of the United Kingdom, William Hodgson of Australia, Hernan Santa Cruz of Chile and John P. Humphrey of Canada (Un.org, 2018). Here we are afforded some incisive pieces of information: not only was the Declaration in large part penned by representatives of some of the most successful colonial nations on the planet at that juncture in history but there is not a single representative from the African continent on the drafting committee. And this is not to say that the presence of a member from the Union of South Africa (then the singular African state represented in the United Nations) would have been a curative measure but it is to say that the ideological foundations for the category of “human” become somewhat more clarified in their historic and legal formulations from this vantage point. That is to say, it would appear that Africans were not present in the conception of the universal reference point for the

² I put “men and women” here in quotations as this binarised gender classification begins to elucidate what the Declaration holds categorically as “human”. There are those of us here on Earth who are neither.

“human” category (as it pertains to international law) and, thus, it would suggest that Africans were not even theoretically considered “human”. The presence of the Union of South Africa as one of the members of the United Nations whilst instituting what would later be officially ratified as a crime against humanity by the United Nations itself in 1973 (in the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid [Legal.un.org, 2018]) serves to further concretize who was and was not considered “human” by law at this particular juncture in history. This essential negation of Africans in some of the fundamental constructions of actionable humanist doctrine in the 20th century, as well as the history of colonialism and the social relations it produced between Europeans and Africans or, more broadly, colonizers and colonial subjects, leads me to search for a humanism that incorporates the histories of violent social, political and economic domination spurred by colonialism into its theorization.

The academic and creative Zukolwenkosi Zikalala in their paper *Black Queers Must Play* reflects on the South African legal culture as follows:

Reflecting on the moment of transition, Pumla Dineo Gqola views the Constitution as an aspirational document [2015: 57 - 58], it allowed for us ‘to project an image of our society as it would be if we were our best selves.’ [ibid] She situates this aspirational text alongside Bishop Tutu’s naming of us as ‘the rainbow people of God’ [ibid.]; the texts, she argues, are aspirational because of the hope that they gave. [ibid.] It is the naming of subjects in post-1994 South Africa, as existing within a rainbow nation: that all-inclusive term which seeks to transcend race, class, and creed differences, that is of interest to me. In its bid toward building and creating a new nation, it is important to consider what a rainbow nation means for black queer subjects who continue to seek representation outside of the edifice of violence.

In the paper *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Postcolonial Humanism* (2011) the scholar Pramod K. Nayar argues, through a detailed reading of the four major works of postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, that Fanon was a proponent of a humanism that would reject the European Enlightenment model. For Nayar Fanon,

...seeks a humanism where difference is respected. Humanism in Fanon is the result of this ‘reciprocal relativism of different cultures’ where the black is no mere ‘object’ but a

black human for the white. In similar fashion the white is not just the white oppressor/master but a white human. This humanism is not about emulating the model of human embodied in the European, who is, as Fanon points, part of a race of 'murderers' (2011: 24)

Nayar argues that it is through Fanon's insistence on violence against colonial domination, a violence "embedded in the dialectic of master- slave", that Fanon appeals to a postcolonial humanism. In Nayar's paper I am particularly concerned with what Nayar raises by way of Diana Fuss' considerations in her article *Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification* (1994), that "the psychoanalytic conceptualization of identification itself emerges within a context of colonialism and imperial relations of white and black" (2011: 23). The implication here being that it is insufficient for the colonized subject to merely reapply modes of identity making developed by colonial forces in the context of imperial and colonial domination to attain their subjecthood as these modes of identity making are embedded in the "crushing objecthood" highlighted by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1956], 2008: 82): the state where the Self is denied selfhood due to the absence of othering, thereby, reducing the black subject to an object (Nayar, 2011: 22).

If "'Personhood' is the privilege of the white man alone, and the black man is 'sealed into 'thingness'" (Nayar, 2011: 23) as Fanon argues, I am interested in frameworks that offer methods of wrestling with the violent colonial history of a denial of personhood and self-making for colonized subjects. I am interested in using these historical lenses and provocations of the human category to discover what that leaves us with in the way of thinking about black subjecthood and for, as the theorist and creative Mbongeni Mtshali puts it, "thinking through the world queerly"³. The following texts detail explorations into the theory of *disidentification* (1999) developed by the queer cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz. I look at the work of three different black artists (Todd Gray, Sethembile Msezane and Athi-Patra Ruga) and, applying a Practice as Research methodology, incorporate elements of their artistic practices into my own artistic practice to research methods by which the master-slave dialectic

³ From an oral seminar presentation on translation at the University of Cape Town in July 2018.

can be troubled and to begin to imagine systems of identification that queer binaristic identification categories.

Modes of *Disidentification*

The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self...[Disidentification] is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. (Muñoz, 1999: 5 and 8)

The theory of *intersectionality* (1989), theorised by critical legal theorist Kimberlé William Crenshaw, has given us a framework through which to think about the plurality of identity. In Crenshaw's theorizations, much as in Muñoz', she argues that the convergence of a myriad of identities on the site of a singular body (in Crenshaw's theorization the body of black women) requires a *politique* that is multimodal in its formulations to conceive of the plural ways in which oppression can be experienced. From these theoretical underpinnings Muñoz offers perspectives of how intersectionality is performed by queer artists of colour. Here I would like to offer examples of artists who display this self-same disidentification practice from the perspectives of blackness (through the multimedia visual art of Todd Gray), black femininity (through the multimodal work of Sethembile Msezane) and queerness (through the psychosphere invoked by the work of Athi Patra-Ruga) respectively. I believe the practices of the artists below formed the ideological and, later, practical scaffolding for my own foray into disidentificatory practice through my performance works *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations* and *icarus' descent*.

Todd Gray and the visual modalities of Blackness ⁴

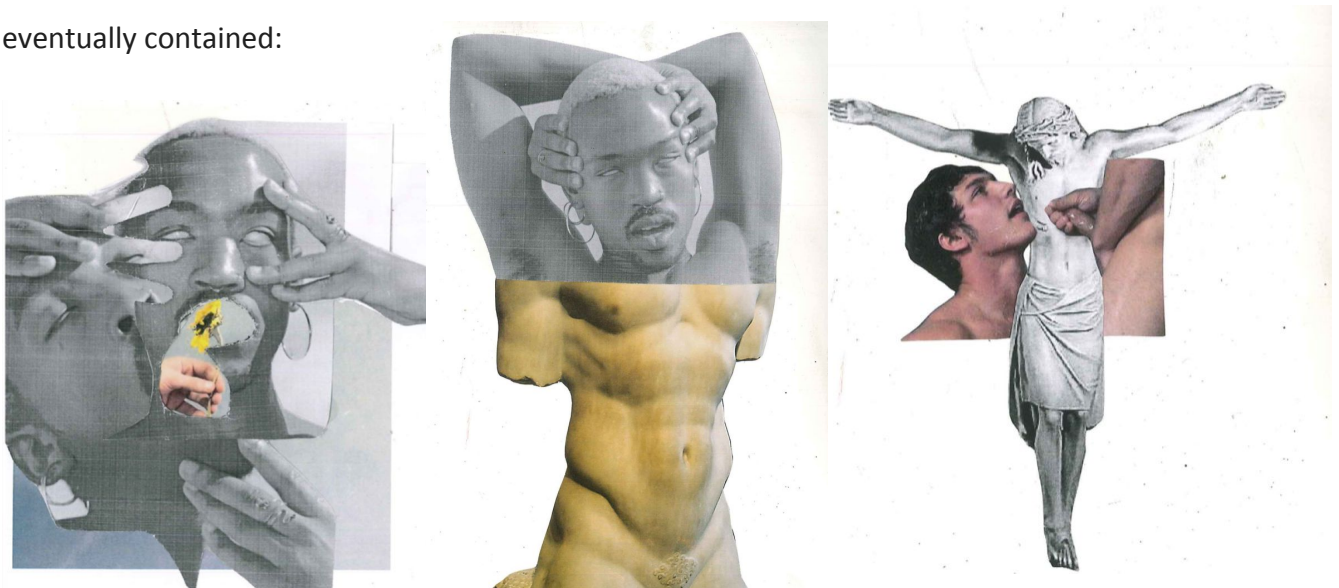


Todd Gray, *Flora Africanus (Dance)*, 2017.

In Todd Gray's exhibition *Pluralities of Being* (2017) Gray presents intimate photographic work he did with Michael Jackson in the 1980's and juxtaposes these works with photographs and drawings created in residency at NIROX in Johannesburg, South Africa alongside images of constellations and tableaux of forests and greenery. All this held together in frames both found and gifted to the artist over time. The result is a body of work that exists in the universe of a kind of post-human nostalgia. A post-humanism that is a visual interpretation of "the multiplicity of interlocking identity components" (*ibid.*) Muñoz refers to above. As though the human race had experienced its pending apocalypse and these are the historical vestments left for the extra-terrestrial equivalent of archaeologists and anthropologists to piece together a semblance of what human life might have looked like on earth. The experience is similar to the beginning sequence of Terence Malik's film *Tree of Life* (2011) in which we observe the birth of a galaxy. Gray has managed to capture one solar system in the vast universe of blackness. What

⁴ The following is a development of an article I wrote for the art publication ArtThrob in 2017 and is cited in the bibliography below.

this practice triggers for me is a methodology, through collage, that collapses various modes of identifiable blackness. A way of visualizing the disruption of a linear identity making process. This form of collage became a technique that I employed in my own practice as a means of physically visualizing the ideas that I was working with *vis a vis* seemingly oppositional identity poles (ie black and white; sacred and profane). This practice resulted in the development of a collection of visual collages, a combination of photography of myself taken by friends and found images, that then became a kind of improvised hymnal for the sermon-cum-lecture performance that would later become *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations*. Below, some examples of what this hymnal eventually contained:



Gray's practice of intersplicing images of Michael Jackson, arguably a deified figure himself, with images of other life worlds of black people and further juxtaposing those with interstellar images of space modelled for me a tactile way to realise what had only existed in my mind as conceptual matter. This form of juxtapositional collage invites the viewer to draw parallels between the images. In the example of Gray's portraiture of Jackson it appears to ask the viewer to, for a moment, allow Jackson down from his altar of celebrity and to perceive him in relation to other articulations of quotidian blackness. In my collaging practice I am gesturing towards a collapse of binary opposites that allows these supposed opposites to exist together,

informing one another and destabilizing easy appeals to linear modes of meaning and people making.

Blackness as Integer

A further point of intrigue for me in Gray's practice in this particular exhibition is his depiction of a blackness that is not characterized by its opposition to whiteness, nor qualified by its struggle under white supremacy, but blackness as an integer. That is to say: blackness as a conceptual whole in and of itself, a point that is in seeming opposition to that of Nayar's reading of Fanon,

'Personhood' is the privilege of the white man alone, and the black man is sealed into 'thingness', writes Fanon... which suggests an absence of recognition and therefore a condition of dehumanization... Without this recognition there is no self-consciousness... Recognition, in other words, is a consequence of *struggle*. This struggle is essentially a struggle by the colonized for his *humanity* (2011: 23)

Fanon's assertion complicates my reading of the proposition that I read in the work of Gray, a proposition I find both exciting and urgently necessary, particularly in a contemporary political climate where identity politics is utilized to reduce black artists, and black people more broadly, to their socio-political categories. This reduction is another form of dehumanization where black people are continually relegated to expositing the elements most accessible and indicative of blackness to the white gaze and imaginary: a neo-exoticization that is too often displayed by many white-dominated art contexts in South Africa and further afield (Stielau, 2016). Gray deftly evades this "distraction"⁵, as Toni Morrison puts it, by pluralizing the associations of blackness. By utilizing the image of Michael Jackson, a figure recognized for his

⁵ "The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing."(Morrison, 1975)

celebrity and iconic status, and juxtaposing and collaging these images with those of the natural world, both the heavenly and earthen, Gray makes a statement on blackness as organism- a small and necessary galaxy within the infinite universe of black possibility. Here Jackson's image is not utilized for the notoriety attached to his legacy- that idea is already in the room by association. Instead Gray subverts our expectation for Jackson to become an element of scrutinization for our amusement (much like in the human zoos found in much of Northern Europe and America from the late 1800s through to the mid-1900s) and is instead humanized by his intimate relation to the organic world. Jackson's notoriety, artistic prowess, iconic status and blackness all collide in a quiet supernova of infinite post-humanity: a post-humanity that is not bound by its socio-political associations nor qualified by its contradictions but unbounded by its ever expanding nature; an integer limitless in its potential permutations. This post-humanism is interesting for me and my practice as it then became the bedrock off of which I built the visual components of *Jesus Thesis* which were seminal in finding a language with which to breathe life into the *Jesus Thesis* biomythography.



Todd Gray, *Kromdraai, Ehikhamenor, Cosmos, Bellagio*, 2017.

Blackness as proxy

The juxtaposition of portraits of Jackson spliced with images of space and forest tableaus hints at the theme of blackness becoming a metaphor for the natural world or “nature”. I struggled with this concept at first as there is a history of blackness being likened to a kind of primitivist naturalism (Hobson, 2008). I wondered as I strolled through Gray’s exhibition whether this juxtaposition played into the discourse of blackness being akin to beast. I think with the addition of interstellar imagery and portraiture of other black people makes it clear that the discourse that Gray is engaging with is more post-humanist than primitivist. However, this tension became an interesting point of consideration and complexification within the *Jesus Thesis* performance and, later, the *icarus descent* performance as well. What I mean by this is that leaning into the potential problematics of performing elements of my blackness and queerness (my Otherness) brings into sharp relief questions around agency. If I *choose* to step into the potential problematics of performing a form of black, queer spectacularity *where* does the power lie, and to whom does it belong? Viewer or performer? If the *cage* or *frame* is of my own making to what extent does the performance become a reperformance of reductivist representations of blackness and queerness and to what extent does this choice empower me by virtue of the agency I have taken to employ that mode of representation? These are all elements that sit within the world that Gray constructs.

To return to Gray, the strongest analogy that was manifest for me in the portraits counterposing black people, Jackson and various iterations of the natural world was that of blackness as a post-human category: a category that does not circumscribe to the hierarchical categorizations of human but appeals to a much more horizontal, multispecies spectrum of sentience. When contextualised alongside how the category of “human” has been socio-historically constructed (white, male and able-bodied) this allegory sits quite well with me. However, the potential implication of the dehumanizing primitivist discourse still sits at the back of my mind. Perhaps, merely as a result of my innate scepticism of the politics of the art world.

What I am certain of is that Gray manages to deftly, deeply and poignantly interrogate complex ideas about blackness that do not relent to the reduction of blackness by the white imaginary

and challenges my own ability to imagine blackness in ways that are neither oppositional nor hierarchical. An experience that is immensely galvanizing and inspiring as a young art maker who is trying to imagine alternative trajectories for my own expressions of blackness. And, insofar as young art makers imagining alternate trajectories for expression, few approach the project of rehistoricitation with as deft a hand as South African visual and performance artist Sethembile Msezane.

Sethembile Msezane and the Re-remembrance of Erased Femininities in Histories⁶



Sethembile Msezane, *Untitled (Heritage Day)*, 2013.

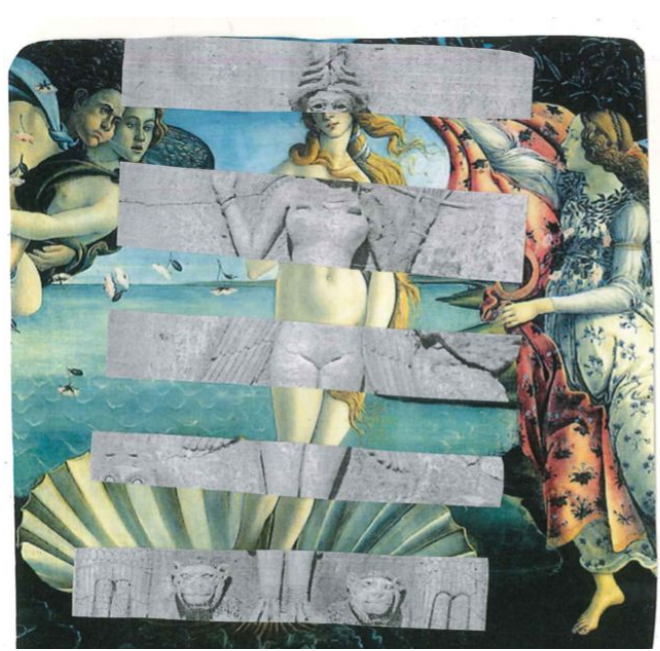
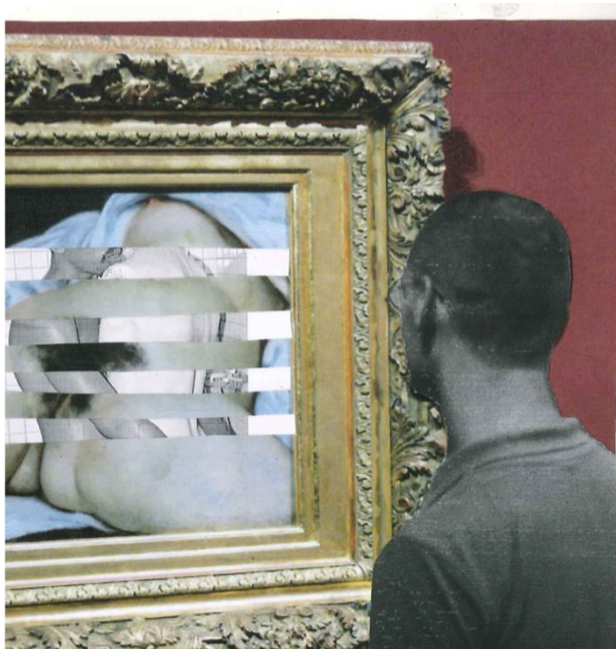
Untitled (Heritage Day) was the first in Msezane's *Public Holiday* series, initiating a body of performative work that spanned two years. In these works, Msezane re-contextualizes and re-remembers the physical geography of the Cape Town central business district and its monuments. Not only does Msezane's work operate at the level of race, contesting the concrete representation and lionization of whiteness and the legacy of black subjugation in the

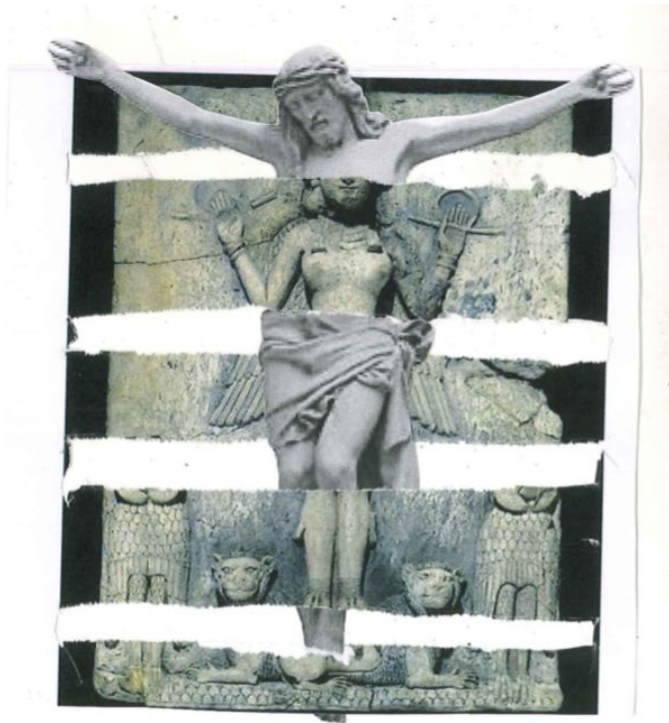
⁶ The following is a development of an article I wrote for the art publication ArtThrob in 2017 and is cited in the bibliography below.

form of colonial and Apartheid era memorialization monuments, but the work counterposes this layer of critique by gendering the lens.

In the series, Msezane performs her gendered body as inextricably linked to her racialized body. *Heritage Day* sees her in the traditional, celebratory garb and adornments of uMemulo (the coming of age ceremony for women in Zulu tradition). The performance of these signifiers operates as a critique not only of the white/rainbow-washing of the September 24th public holiday but also as a critique of the valorization of historic, masculine figures (such as Shaka kaSenzangakhona) and the implicit invisibilization of female figures. This counterposition then becomes an intersection, the crossing of which is the body of Msezane. The lens is not only racial, but cultural; not only cultural, but gendered; not only contemporary but a recapitulation of a history of erased black femininities.

What became interesting for me to consider in the rendering of the *Jesus Thesis* universe particularly, due in large part to the feminist lens which Msezane applies to her work, was the eclipsing of the feminine figures in the story of Jesus, specifically that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Through the construction of a narrative world for *Jesus Thesis* I found myself drawn toward the figure of Mary, not so much as a character in the biblical Jesus story but, rather, as an archetype. The archetype of the divine feminine; the primordial creator who, through the patriarchal processes of historical remembrance, has been eclipsed by her masculine counterparts. I sought to discover more narratives of these divine feminine figures which brought me back to the development of these ideas through collage:





The above images feature depictions of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the Greek goddess Aphrodite, the Sumerian Goddess Inana and the Gustave Courbet painting *The Origin of Life* (1866). The idea here was to play with these images that shared strange parallels. For example, the goddesses Aphrodite and Inana are, in mythology, parthenogenetic. *Parthenogenesis* find its etymological roots in the Greek *parthenos* (meaning *virgin*) and *gignesthai* (meaning *to be born*). This means they were not born by means of traditional fertilization of an egg by sperm but *bore themselves*, or, were *virginally begotten*. A narrative that shares obvious parallels with Jesus' birth story and the immaculate conception of Mary. In the same way that Msezane's work acts as a remembrance of the feminine in spaces where it has been erased I sought to create a fictionalised remembrance of these goddesses, their narratives and create a conceptual bridge to the existence of the figure of Jesus being contingent on the existence (and subsequent erasure) of these goddesses and their stories.

Arjun Appadurai, a contemporary socio-cultural anthropologist, wrote in *Modernity at Large* that:

the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.(1996)

This offers us a way of understanding the work of art in the present moment as an active form of labour that operates to achieve a myriad of divergent functions. Through the processes of constructing images, there is a particular kind of imagined world that is being represented.? If we understand 'the imagined' to be no less real than 'the observable' then it follows, existentially, that that which goes unimagined and is unobservable does not exist. Herein lies the importance of work such as Msezane's. Work that projects images of the observable and imagined worlds of a particular iteration of blackness. Representations of the known and the speculated; the remembered and the re-remembered. And, it is into this canon of remembrance work that I wanted to situate *Jesus Thesis*. As a methodology of queering public memory and mythological archives and casting them into a state of relationality as well as plurality

The work that Msezane's work does is to operate as a mechanism of re-remembering both our named and unnamed ancestors. Those whom history refused to document but have lived on in the psychosomatics of their descendants. Msezane's work operates as a vindication of intergenerational memory and a love letter to all those young, black South Africans who have been dispossessed of their history; an offering of return. And if Msezane's project is the collection and revisitation of a shared collective history then it is the work of Athi Patra-Ruga to create a context and container of celebration in this commemoration for the community for whom this work is made.

Athi-Patra Ruga and the Circle of Loving Companions⁷



Athi-Patra Ruga, *Lizalis Indinga Lakho/Autistik Imperium*, 2014–2017.

Installation view: WHATIFTHEWORLD, Cape Town

In artist Athi-Patra Ruga's exhibition *Queens in Exile* Ruga adds to the black, queer canon of visual art a singular mythos imbued with high femme, South African-centric, political rigour. In *Queens in Exile* Ruga cultivates a psychosphere of concentrated black, queer energy that harkens to a kind of nostalgia for something that never was: a dynasty for the forgotten footnotes of South African national history. The fabled gods that time forgot and the history of whiteness erased.

In the video component of the exhibition, Ruga is depicted adopting the persona of black, queer avatar embodying and channeling various black and queer historical figures of South Africa's past. Bedecked in luscious gold fabric and heavily bejeweled, Ruga pays homage to figures as

⁷ The following is a development of an article I wrote for the art publication ArtThrob in 2017 and is cited in the bibliography below.

wide and as varied as Brenda Fassie to Steve Biko; Nonqawuse to Winnie Mandela. Matriarchs, militants, mavericks, mothers and martyrs. They are all invoked with reverence and deference as if to form a modern day black and queer pantheon. And Ruga stands as high priestess conducting ceremony. The sense of ritual is palpable; the stakes are high. Every bead and sequin in its place. Every cylindrical gesture of the arms intently rendered. A kind of practical magic for summoning the exiled queens of a bygone era. This form of myth making and high femme performativity inspired the performance language for *Jesus Thesis*. The way in which Ruga collapses historical figures into one another was the performative articulation of the collages I had been making to visualise this mode of identity collapsing.

Not only does Ruga bedeck his exhibition with representations of historic and imagined black and queer mavericks but *Queens in Exile* features the communal creative abilities of a much wider, young, black and queer creative community. All pushing the envelope in their respective disciplines the exhibition features the creative inputs of Jody Brand, Unathi Mkonto, Angelo Valerio and Elijah Ndoumbé (including others). The importance of collecting the energy, creative eyes and multiple aesthetic sensibilities of the local black and queer community is both ingenious and a testament to Ruga's politics of ensuring that this content is handled by the community who it is generated from, about and (in my opinion) for. By surrounding himself and his work with members of this local black and queer community Ruga invokes what Scott Dillard refers to as the Circle of Loving Companions in his article *Breathing Darrell: Solo performance as a contribution to a useful queer mythology*. To expand on the Circle of Loving Companions

What redeems our lives, what makes of death a living, is this circle of companions-bonds based on true caring, not the unthinking obligations of blood relations. Our loving friends lend grace and humor to the transformations of age and death. Their caring keeps our memory alive, ensuring that our life's work will not be forgotten (Roscoe: 1995 in Dillard: 2000)

In a similar gesture, for all the photographic work that has gone into mounting both *Jesus Thesis* and *icarus' descent* I called on the support of my own circle of loving companions. Below a

selection from the series of photographic work that I did prior to and after mounting *Jesus Thesis* and *icarus' descent* to try and visualise and develop the world I was trying to manifest. Many of the photographs subsequently formed part of the collages that furthered my ability to visually language the concepts I was working with and were also displayed in the performance of *Jesus Thesis*:

Rose of Sharon with Ugo Woatzi



She of Many Faces with Jesse Navarre Vos



body party with Brooklyn Dahmer



Rough Rider with Elijah Ndoumbé



What the above artists (Gray, Msezane and Ruga) afford for my practice are examples of practices that manipulate the elements of representational identity (through the manipulation of imagery and representations of self) to gesture towards alternate and multiplicitous ways of being. Arguably, divergent articulations of and rehearsals for the “queer futurity” (Muñoz, 2009) that Muñoz gestures towards in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in that none of these artists in their practices present static, transparent interpretations of identity but, rather, they present potentialities, historical redactions and reinterpretations that perform

a kind of biomythography. A process by which biography and mythology collapse into one another to bring into dispute the veracity of history and memory and, by extension, identity.

In the following chapter I seek to trace my own practices of biomythography and the resultant complexification of identity it espoused in my own practice.

Biomythography, critical fabulation and disidentification in practice

In Scott Dillard's article, *Breathing Darrell: Solo performance as a contribution to a useful queer mythology*, Dillard meditates on the construction of his solo performance *Breathing Darrell*, a memorial to his deceased partner who died of AIDS, and characterizes this work as a contribution to "a useful queer mythology" (2000: 74). Dillard, a professor of performance and rhetoric at Georgia College and State University, describes useful queer mythology as follows: "A useful gay mythology is one in which gay men⁸ create meaningful roles and tell meaningful stories that link them to past roles in previous societies and cultures" (2000: 75). The "roles" Dillard refers to are the archetypal roles of "The Stand Between People" and the "Circle of Loving Companions". Dillard uses these archetypes as templates of roles performed by queer people in societies other than his own and utilizes them in the realization of his performance.

With regard to the archetype of "The Stand Between People" Dillard utilizes the description of Andrew Ramer,

We stand between genders. We stand between the living and the dead. We stand between night and day. We stand between matter and spirit. Our job is to scout that terrain for the main body of the tribe, and to bring back all that information for the main body of the tribe (Ramer 1998 cited Dillard, 2000: 76)

And further explicates on this role using an example from the mythology of the Yokut tribe of Native Americans,

⁸ I believe this practice extends beyond just the category of "gay men".

...the Yokut Indians whose two-spirit⁹ persons, or *tono'chim*, traditionally buried the dead. They became the handlers of corpses because of their ability to commune with the dead through dreams (Dillard, 2000: 26)

Here we see that what for Dillard is the defining feature of “The Stand Between People” archetype is their ability to go between worlds. To act as envoys and bridges between worlds and provide access and clarity into these worlds and epistemologies that are not readily available to people not of this archetype.

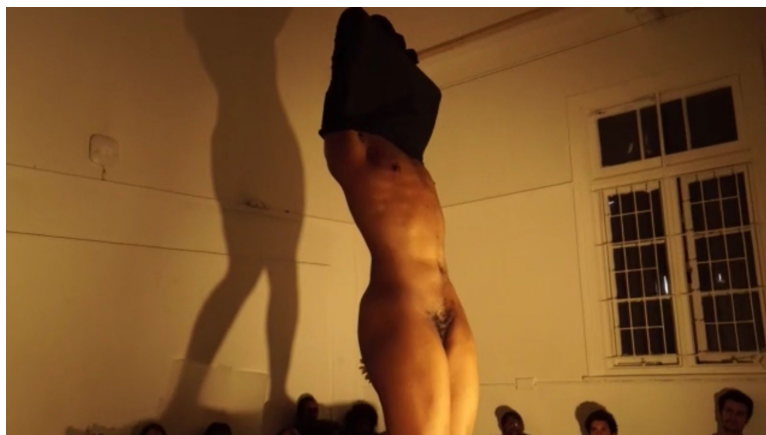
My own performance work, *Jesus Thesis and other Critical Fabulations*, is deeply in dialogue with the use of archetypes to construct a “useful queer mythology”. The work developed from an interest in forms of representation as they related to blackness and queerness. I had long since been frustrated with the seeming rigidity identity categories such as “black” and “queer” (categories that I identify with) seemed to be accompanied by. I was interested in what it would mean to *embody* these categories of definition beyond *presenting* them as surface level markers of identity. I was equally interested in developing strategies that would push up against the rigidity of these identity categories and perform, in the Muñozian sense, a kind of disidentification: at once identifying *with* and *against* the presented identity modes. My strategy to achieve this was to create relational juxtapositions.

In its earliest stages the work saw me using images and sonic scapes I associated with popular and canonical Western¹⁰ classicism: namely the statue of *The Venus de Milo* and the *The Flower Duet* from Leo Delibes’ opera *Lakme*. I used these classical, Western references to allude to associations of classical beauty as theatrical devices that would both work to frame my body as congruent with this form of classical beauty while at the same time present something of a

⁹ Here “two-spirit” denotes the following: “Two spirit” refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity. As an umbrella term it may encompass same-sex attraction and a wide variety of gender variance, including people who might be described in Western culture as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, gender queer, cross-dressers or who have multiple gender identities. (Fewster, 2019)

¹⁰ By “Western” here I am specifically referencing Western Europe, hence I used works emanating from this part of the world (the Grecian statuary of *The Venus de Milo* and the French opera of *The Flower Duet*)

decidedly more grotesque nature. A re-representation of these already representative modes. By mounting a plinth I endeavored to, as Sethembile Msezane does in her work mentioned earlier, become a living monument that would be the site of the convergence of a multitude of associations: blackness, queerness, classical statuary... Performing a negation of this perceived Western classicality while reinforcing the spectacularity associated with Othered bodies by making of myself a spectacle. Herein is where the complexification of rigid identity theory lies for me in the performance of this work. Through choosing to perform a form of spectacularity I reference the colonial history of the violent display of black, African people in human zoos and exhibitions in Western Europe. However, my desire is neither to replicate this historic dynamic of observation nor, necessarily, to subvert or critique it but, instead, to interrogate, to quote Hershini Bhana Young, the “relational ontology in which the meaning of objects and people is forged out of the relations between them” (2017: 21). I was interested in finding mechanisms to disidentify with the simplistic binary imposed on minoritarian subjects as always implicitly victims or objects. I wanted to question the assumption of an absence of agency that can often be attached to minoritarian subjects. Neither to claim that minoritarian subjects are always in positions of power when choosing how they are represented or when they represent themselves, nor to claim the opposite. But, rather, to indicate the complex nature agency, autonomy and representation achieve in the dialectical frame of performance.



Performance still of *Jesus Thesis and other Critical Fabulations* in its research and development stage. University of Cape Town, Hiddingh Campus. 2018.

Of Gods and Go-Go Boys: Archetypal Psycho-Analytics, Critical Fabulations and Useful Mythologies in Queer Creative Practice

If I'm honest, the foundations of what I understand to be my sexuality are constituted of projections and approximations. More than a fact of *desire* or *being* it is an improvised framework for navigating the worlds of desire and desirability, performing some sense of an orientation. An orientation that I understand to exist between the axes of desire and performativity. My earliest memory of desire was accidentally stumbling across a picture book of gay pornstars from Falcon Studios (a popular gay porn studio featuring only the godliest of the Adonis archetype) in the children's section of an Exclusive Books bookstore. I think these were the first erect penises I'd ever seen, displayed in full effect alongside fabled, full-lipped princes with skin white as alabaster in various postures of repose: Grecian statuary come to life. The Promethean fire it lit inside me both ferocious and damning. Even earlier still, I remember performing some kind of a queerness alongside my brother. We were trying on our mother's high heels. I can still remember the feeling of the tissues we stuffed her shoes with to make up for the spare room my then much smaller feet left in her shoes. I remember teetering through the hallways of my childhood house with my brother. The modest, middle class homestead transforming into a palace of which my brother and I were the queens. These projections and performances, these flights of fancy facilitated my initial forays into understanding myself as queer. And when I mobilize the term "queer" I use it to indicate a potentiality as set out in José Esteban Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.

(2009: 1)

And, I suppose, with this framework for understanding queerness in place I can reflect on these seminal moments of queer becoming in my childhood as a projection of a "self" that was "not

yet here". A self performing the potentiality of a future self and the possible ways in which this self might be able- might desire- to move through the world.

These constitutive moments of queer construction in my childhood set up the scaffolding for the establishment of a motif throughout my queer becoming. In my adolescence I would scour the internet, the television, the bookstore for any traces of this potentiality, the possibility of actually *being* this particular kind of Other. I found refuge in gay pornsites and television shows like *Queer as Folk* and *Sex and the City* wherein which the mechanics of gay sex (a sexual possibility that exists outside the collective consciousness of heteronormativity) and *gay being* were revealed to me (albeit in a mode that was decidedly homonormative in that they were predominantly phallogentric). It was through these interfaces that I would learn the codes and archetypes of queer sex and sexuality as they moved in popular queer discourse at the time (read: white, gay, male, cisgender, sex-centric discourse) . It was in these hallowed halls that sex and sexuality became irrevocably intertwined for me, that my sexuality and a part of my being was concomitant on my sexual performativity. And, yet, the actualization of this sexual self remained in the realm of the imaginary. My queer *being* was not enacted but, rather, projected. In this way my understanding of my queer self was not a *becoming* nor a *happening* but rather an *ideality* founded upon learned codes of sexual performativity. And within, or in between, these learned codes of sexual performativity certain archetypes of a gay male performativity arose.

In *On the Nature of the Psyche* Carl Gustav Jung says of the archetype, "[it] is in itself irrepresentable, but has effects which make visualizations of it possible, namely, the archetypal images and ideas." (2001: 147). By this irrepresentability Jung brings our attention to the amorphous quality of the archetype. That it is a psychic prefiguration that would gesture toward the potentiality of a shared collective subconscious that gives rise to these images and ideas. I say "shared collective subconscious" to gesture towards the way in which certain prefigural motifs arise within different cultural groups. Jung notes further on the "problem" of qualifying qualitative prefigurations,

We meet with a similar situation in physics: there the smallest particles are themselves irrepresentable but have effects from the nature of which we can build up a model. The archetypal image, the motif or mythologem, is a construction of this kind. (*ibid.*)

These collective motifs and mythologies form the building blocks for intricate cultural systems and subcultures. They are found in the stories and behaviours that are passed down and inherited through lineages and cultural formations. They are not only passed down through lineages and kinship networks of blood but also cultural groups that are socially constructed .

In the seminal psychological, women's studies text *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* senior Jungian psychoanalyst, poet and *cantadora* Clarissa Pinkola Estés collects stories and myths of Latin American, Hungarian, Native American and East Asian origin that contain a semblance of what she has dubbed the Wild Woman archetype. Estés uses these stories to facilitate "extensive "psychic-archeological" digs in the ruins of the female underworld" (2003: 1 - 2) in the hopes of uncovering "the ways and means of women's deepest nature" (2). What Estés proposes is that there are deep psycho-archeological instruments that are passed down in these stories, these mythologies, that pertain to a shared psychic nature amongst people who understand themselves as "women". For the purposes of this paper I will not interrogate the potentially biologically deterministic and binarized framework that the category "women" can imply but will instead view the term from a perspective of denoting a particular group of people who identify with that terminology and understand themselves to be part of this nebulous category. What I am trying to bring attention to, more than a deconstructive gender analysis, is the way in which Estés mobilizes these myths and stories to, firstly, highlight the commonality of the Wild Woman archetype throughout myth-making the world over and how, secondly, these myths apply to the lived realities of people who identify with the category of "women" today. This framework becomes useful in my research as I posit a similar framework for charting a particular kind of mythological figure in the collective queer subconscious and its articulations through different artistic forms.

Critical fabulations and queer mythologies

In Greek mythology the figures of Patroclus and Achilles, heroes of the Trojan War in the epic poem attributed to Homer *The Iliad*, and the nature of their relationship is shrouded in queer speculation. Were they friends and comrades on the battlefield? Were they lovers? Were they some complex combination of the two? Author and professor of modern Greek literature Gregory Jusdanis writes,

To make Achilles and Patroclus gay is not historically false in the way it would be if they were given Facebook accounts or were discussing multiculturalism over cappuccino. Making them homosexual imposes upon them a fixed identity, like a heavy armor, an ontological essence foreign to antiquity and one that constrains behavior. In this way modern readers miss the opportunity to apprehend a different conception of human practice (n.d.)

Here, Jusdanis proposes that modern readers project a particular sexual identity onto the tragic heroes that limits the potential complexities of their relationship. In fact, it can be argued that instead of queering this literary relationship modern perspectives force the relationship into a homonormative framework that is easily distinguishable as a “gay relationship” that categorizes these characters as categorically gay. More than the particularities of what the two figures’ relationship implies about their imagined sexual orientations I am more interested in the literary interpretations and narrative archetypes the Patroclus and Achilles relationship inspire in the imaginary, the collective subconscious of the queer creative canon. An example of their appearance elsewhere in the queer creative canon is in the poems of Caitlyn Siehl, who imagines the tragic heroes writing letters to each other after the death of Patroclus on the battlefield of the Trojan War in the arms and armour of Achilles.

My love, how was I to know
that they would make a myth of us?
Did we not die? Are we not dead?
Are your bones not my bones?

Before the war.
Before we had to
kiss Troy out of each other's
teeth, we were a paradise.
You were the only one I kneeled
before.
You made the warrior in me tired.

They write about your death.
How I sliced through countless
men trying to build a
monument to the monster
I was after your body
blazed before me.

I can tell you now that
I begged for the arrow.
Welcomed it.
My last wish was to
sleep beside you in our tent.
To hide you so well in the afterlife
that no God could take you
from me again.

My quiet love was yours from the
beginning.
I call my ankles by your name.
When mother dipped me in the river, she was introducing us.

- *Achilles to Patroclus* (Siehl, 2016)

On the night of my death,
your despair was so loud
that I could hear it
clawing through the earth to find me.
All the men screaming, begging,
still could not drown out the
wailing of your hands.

I once held your soldier heart
between my war teeth, shook it
like a dog with a bone until
it knew the fear of good love.
Do you remember?

I wore your
armor just to feel deathless.
I wore your armor just to know
what it meant to be inside of you.

I will dream of kissing your ankles again,
of pulling the weeping arrow out of you
and cutting through the earth
so that we may walk among it.

My love. My life.
What I would give to be

the only pile of ashes here.
 What I would give to be
 a sleeping body beside you.

- *Patroclus to Achilles* (Siehl, 2016)

In the above, Siehl entreats the reader to engage with what Saidiya Hartman phrases as “critical fabulation” (2008: 11), a process by which the gaps in a story (whether fact or fiction) are filled in, or fabulated, to infer an alternative reading of an event. The fabulation, however, does not necessarily change the trajectory of the overarching narrative it engages with but, instead, offers insights into the gaps of the narrative that allow for an alternative reading of the story wherein which the events remain fundamentally unchanged. The above poetic interventions do not change the fundamental narrative sequence of events in the story of Patroclus and Achilles, quite the contrary, as it makes direct reference to the events documented in the *The Iliad* of Patroclus’ death and Achilles’ resultant, vengeful, grief-logged wrath. Thereby, concurrently reinforcing the veracity of the narrative and throwing its reading into speculation. In this practice of critical fabulation we see a similar gesture towards the ideality and potentiality that Muñoz’ gestures towards in *Cruising Utopia* in that the act of fabulating inherently questions the veracity of documented history (whether fact or fictionalized) and posits that what has been documented exists as an approximation, an ideality, a potentiality amongst a series of other potentialities. In this way we can understand this process of critically fabulating to be in and of itself a queer mode of meaning making in the Muñozian sense.

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis “what happened when” and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history (Hartman, 2008: 11)

It is into this practice and queer canon of queer, critical fabulations that the performance work I created at the end of 2018, *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations*, sits.

“How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everyone? No. By slowly becoming everything.” (Roy, 2017)

In *Jesus Thesis* I took inspiration from the book *The Invention of Women* by Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. In *The Invention of Women* Oyěwùmí posits that “the entire western episteme bases its categories and hierarchies on visual modes and binary distinctions: male and female, white and black, homosexual and heterosexual etc” (Oyěwùmí, 1997). *Jesus Thesis* was a practical attempt at utilizing the tools of disidentification from Muñoz, biomythography from Audre Lorde and critical fabulation from Saidiya Hartman to propose a palimpsest of identity that complicates the primacy of sight as the definitive means of meaning/people making. Muñoz says of *Disidentifications*,

Disidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. (Muñoz, 1999: 8)

In practice this meant that prior to the performance I collaborated with a photographer, Jesse Navarre Vos, and took photographs using visual references that had associations with a particular race, gender and/or geolocality and, effectively, laid them on top of and in juxtaposition to each other. An example of this being the pictures below:



The idea here was to juxtapose the sacred imagery with a decidedly profane interpretation that itself achieves a kind of sacredness. As though this image of the black, gender-queer Virgin Mary could stand in for the interpretation most often proliferated in the visual collective conscious of the Christian canon. Thus, proposing not a fictional “black, gender-queer Virgin Mary” but questioning the veracity of the documented Christian canon and positing that the Virgin Mary could have in fact been both black and gender-queer. Insofar as the canonical Bible narrative is concerned this fabulation does not disrupt the narrative trajectory of the story of Mary as the biological mechanics of the immaculate conception and her documented geolocality in the Middle East are not contradicted by this fabulated black, queer avatar. It is in this queering of the popular image of the Virgin Mary that I then propose an ideality rooted in the past that is not *in opposition to* the popularly proliferated image of the Virgin Mary but offers *a potentiality* of how this historical figure can be viewed that is neither fiction nor fact but an approximation that situates itself in between overly deterministic representations. Offering, in the Muñozian sense, a utopian gesture in the way of meaning making that is neither

deterministic nor pragmatic in its political and philosophical implications but, rather, posturing toward a politic of possibility and potentiality.

For Muñoz “the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging-in-difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (2009: 20). This he positions in opposition to what he labels as “gay pragmatism” (19): a homonormative political program that positions assimilation into the heteronormative institution of marriage as one of the necessary requirements for gay liberation. Muñoz goes further in saying that, “multiple forms of belonging-in-difference and expansive critiques of social asymmetries are absent in the dominant LGBT leadership community and in many aspects of queer critique” (20). It is worth noting here that Muñoz speaks from the perspective of the North American, queer, socio-political milieu and, though this perspective may not be applicable in all contexts, it is nonetheless indicative of a particular figuration of contemporary queer political discourse and, arguably, much of popular, global, minoritarian socio-political discourse. That is to say that assimilation into dominant, normative structures as a socio-political tool of achieving liberation for minoritarian subjects is widely championed as a viable and favorable liberatory mechanism. Here, I would like to suggest that in the same way that Muñoz problematizes the dominance of this aspiration to normative assimilation in *Cruising Utopia*, *Jesus Thesis* problematizes the dominance of the visual field in the process of “people-making”.

In *Jesus Thesis* the utopian gesture is to encourage a meaning making process that “displace[s] the received or authorized account... to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (Hartman, 2008: 11). The implications of this kind of fabulation process disrupts the hegemony of accepted modes of knowing, the veracity of historical narratives, which in the case of *Jesus Thesis* would be the popular representation of the story of Jesus, and makes it possible for minoritarian subjects to exist within the dominant canons that are understood to belong to majoritarian subjects. It is in this way then not a “reimagining” of the story of Jesus but an alternative reading of the Jesus story that can sit alongside the popular narrative of Jesus as a narrative that is equally as possible. This operates

in opposition to majoritarian narratives that would see the appearance of minoritarian subjects as contingent on the history of majoritarian subjects. Examples of this exist in narratives relating to regions of colonial conquest whose history is temporally segmented into “pre” and “post” colonial, positioning colonial contact as the fulcrum around which the history of these regions pivots. This is not to negate or diminish the far reaching impact that colonial contact had on these regions but it is to question the vantage point from which this history is perceived. In this questioning we approach a disruption of hegemonic narratives that appear near intractable through the utilization of a failure to adhere to normative prescriptions of veracity. This failure to subscribe to a hegemonic linearity was the starting point for a performance I created in April of 2019, *icarus’ descent*. Which operated as an extension of this critical, queer fabulation project as well as an embodied investigation into what I am thinking of as a kind of queer prosodic affect.

Queer failure and useful mythology

icarus’ descent took loose inspiration from the Greek myth of Icarus whose father, the skilled craftsman Daedalus, made for himself and his son a pair each of wings glued together with wax intended to help them escape their imprisonment by King Minos of Crete. In the myth Icarus fails to heed the warning of his father,

“The peril stands equal, my son” [Daedalus] said. “If you fly too low, the hungry waves may lick up and drown you; but if you fly too high, the sun may melt the wax which binds your wings together. Fly not too high, my son!” (Waterfield and Waterfield, 2011: 133)

The young Icarus flew too close to the sun, the wax that glued his wings together melted and he plummeted into the sea to his death. For me there are resonances between Icarus’ hubris in daring to fly too close to the sun, an easy metaphor for a kind of utopian ideality or potentiality, and his resultant failure to stay airborne and the ways in which, historically, queer desire (in the way of sexuality and sex) has resulted in a falling from grace for many queer people. By this I am gesturing toward the AIDS pandemic of the 1980/90’s that lead to the deaths of many

queer folk (predominantly gay men) around the world due to inadequate interventions from the state (both in South Africa and many other parts of the world). In this formulation I would like to draw parallels to Icarus' flying too close to the sun, his desire to approach that impossible, scorching horizon, and the desire that queer folk were sharing with each other through sex. I would like to further think of these instances of approaching these desires as a kind of queer failure. A failure to behave in a normative or majoritarian mode that is then met with a resultant falling from grace. This is not to propose that the AIDS pandemic was in any way the "fault" of the queer folks engaging in sex at the time but to position the resultant pandemic as a kind of queer tragedy facilitated by the inaction of the state (who, for the purposes of this analogy can stand in for the gods in the Greek sense). With *icarus descent* I wanted to approach this queer tragedy and build upon Scott Dillard's "useful queer mythology" (2000: 74) methodology .

To return to Dillard, the framework of useful mythology he proposes in relation to his experience of the AIDS pandemic positions queerness as a sociosexual function and positions the AIDS pandemic as an indication of a social moment in history where queer people were inhabiting this role of facilitating the transition of their loved ones from the world of the living to the world of the dead. It was with these ideological underpinnings in mind that I constructed the fabulated mythology of *icarus descent*. I used the setting of a club as an aesthetic reference to the queer, club circuit subculture of dark rooms and bathhouses juxtaposed with the mythological inference of wings suspended in the middle of the darkened club space (to allude to the mythology of Icarus) to also infer, in the same way as *Jesus Thesis*, a queer kind of "churching". I positioned myself as the titular Icarus and cast myself in the role of a go-go dancer. The image of a go-go dancer in the queer club circuit is an immediate reference to an archetype of desire. Always elevated above the dance floor they mediate and facilitate the projected desires of club goers on the dance floor, holding sermon for the aroused and inebriated. Here, I would like to meditate on the analogy of the go-go dancer as a kind of queer,

religious fetish¹¹ by putting forward a series of questions set out by researcher of queer spirituality Will Roscoe:

What are the religious roles and functions assumed by sociosexual variants? How does sociosexual specialization appear in myths and ritual? What are the magical, religious, and philosophical beliefs that have surrounded these practices? How do religious roles relate to social organization of daily life? (1988)

The image of the go-go dancer is one that is prolific throughout the club-circuit sub-culture of (predominantly, but not limited to) gay men. In constructing *icarus descent* I had in mind as a reference the work of the late Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzales-Torres *Untitled (Go-go Dancing Platform)*, a hugely prolific work in the worlds of contemporary art and queer visual culture since its premiere in 1991. In *Untitled (Go-go Dancing Platform)* Gonzales-Torres constructed a platform square fitted with lightbulbs around the perimeter. The platform has enough surface area to house one dancer comfortably. The platform remains empty until a go-go dancer donning short, silver lamé shorts climbs atop it to dance to music that is being played through the dancer's headphones and analogue or electronic music device, hence only the dancer can fully hear the music being played. The dancer's "performance" is unscheduled and begins and ends at the dancer's discretion.



Untitled (Go-go Dancing Platform)

(Andrea Rossen gallery courtesy of The Felix Gonzales-Torres Foundation, 1991)

¹¹ Here, I make use of the word *fetish* to denote "a material object regarded with superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence" (Merriam-webster.com, 2019)

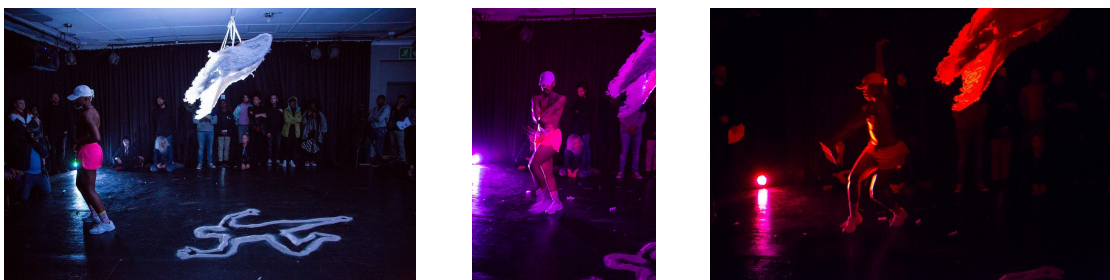
What is interesting about this work- like much of Gonzales-Torres' work- is its interrogation of the art object, its value and what constitutes an art object. The work arguably only “works” or “manifests its meaning” when the dancer activates the platform with their dancing. In this way Gonzales-Torres brings our attention to the work being done by the performer, how their presence and performance is the thing that activates the work such that the work does not exist without the performance and, yet, that performance is ephemeral. In this way the figure of the go-go dancer works as fetish in both its social function and in its commodity function. In the social function the go-go dancer is a locus of erotic desire for the on-looker, a figure that inspires reverence and remuneration for that reverence.



Go-go dancer in a bar (Dorosz, 2017)

In the example of Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Go-go Dancing Platform)* the dancer “activates” the installation and imbues unto it a commodity value that reifies the work as an art object as well as the dancer themselves. It is these mechanics of reification, of queer religio-fetish making, that interest me and that I seek to employ in *icarus descent*.

To further complicate these performances of a queer religio-fetish I make use of deconstructed choreographic languages that allude to queer and urban communities of color, namely: vogue, krump and elements of contemporary South African dance styles. To elucidate, voguing is a dance form that originated in the gay, ballroom subculture of the Black and Latino communities of Harlem in North America in the 1960s (Chatzipapathodoridis, 2017). Formalistically it is typified by its emulation of the poses of high fashion models found on the covers of fashion magazines (hence its title Vogue, after the high fashion magazine of the same name) and the usage of the five elements of vogue: catwalk, hands, duckwalk, dips and spins and floor performance. It includes various styles within the form such as Old Way and Vogue Femme which are stylistically opposed but contain the same five elements. Krump is a style of dance that is part of the umbrella of Hip Hop culture. It is a dance form that originated in 2000 in Los Angeles in North America. It is typified by its use of hard, percussive movements with the arms and legs that indicate a pantomime of heightened aggression. The South African contemporary dance elements that I weave into the choreographic language are movements such as the *vosho* and *gwara gwara*, contemporary dance movements popularized by South African musicians such as DJ Bongz (DJ Bongz, 2018). In a similar gesture of pastiche and palimpsest as *Jesus Thesis* I sought to collapse these choreographic elements into and on top of one another to interrogate the translocality of the iterations of blackness and queerness being harkened through them.



icarus descent (2019) performed as part of the ICA Live Art Workshops in Cape Town, South Africa. Photographed by Carla Eagles

By “translocality” I am “concerned with the dynamics of mobility, migration and socio-spatial interconnectedness” (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013) that exist within these choreographic languages and the potential they have in elucidating translocal blacknesses and queernesses that are not necessarily fixed within the confines denoted by nation states nor are they defined by a shared bloodline and yet their resonances would gesture towards some kind of commonality without erasing or minimizing their specific histories that are informed by (but not limited to) different geographies.

Conclusion

I believe that disidentification, critical fabulation and biomythography as methodologies offer the possibility of disrupting and complicating cultural modes of linear, static and monothematic representation. What the above artists and methodologies proposed through my own practice represent are modes of choosing differently insofar as the politics of representation are concerned. Choosing to work with modes of representation that collapse identities, temporalities and localities to gesture towards a modality of identity construction that is continually in flux. Whether through the use of avatars (as in Ruga's work) or through the re-appropriation of statuary and memorialisation (as in Msezane's work) or the embodiment and performance of imagined archetypes and mythologies there are myriad ways to conceive of ourselves outside of rigid modes of identity theory and, maybe, in this way we can begin to formulate rhizomatic modes of understanding ourselves that circumvent the linear and hierarchical formulations we have been thought into. And, though I may find myself at the end of this particular iteration of this practice as research project I am still left with some questions: What are the epistemic implications of reading queerness into already existing literary and historical texts? How does this complicate rigid identity theory that is founded on western epistemologies of categorical and observable difference? What is the political potency inherent in a disidentification with this rigid identity theory and how do we mobilize a useful queer mythology to a potentially liberating end? In the final preparation stages for this project I am working to further collapse the worlds of binarized representation through an interrogation of space. I would like to use the performative domains that I have cultivated to further collapse the worlds of the sacred and profane; the male and the female; the victim and the perpetrator into one another. To further complicate these static domains of unchallenged knowing to gesture towards the queer horizon of Muñoz. The horizon that holds no certainty but merely a

series of ever increasing potentialities. To quote the queer Chinese-American poet Chen Chen, “When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Series of Further Possibilities (2017)”.

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