On Memory and the Radical Black Imagination

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ON MEMORY AND THE RADICAL BLACK IMAGINATION

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to the memory of my parents Sam George Thomas Jr. and Earnestine Platt Thomas, and to all of those who have gone on to join the ancestors in order for our lives to truly matter.
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Tom for your patience and guidance this semester. Your help has been crucial to the development of this paper, and the refinement of my ideas. I’d like to thank Nari for the ways you have challenged me throughout my time here. Your keen eye has fiercely pointed to my blind spots and helped my work to develop in ways that I couldn’t have imagined. To Lisa, I thank you for all of the ways you have challenged me during the time I have worked with you. You have challenged me immensely, and helped me set the pace for my development in the program. To Juan, thank you for keeping me honest. You always provided me with an ear to discuss the concerns I wanted to address in my work. I’m sure that you will recognize much of what I present here from our many conversations on race, class, and institutional critique. To Carrie, thank you for being there during difficult times. It meant the world to me, and helped me get through it, and afforded me the chance to stay the course and finish my work in the program. I am grateful for the financial assistance received from Hunter College through the Scholarship & Welfare Fund Award and the Kossak Travel Grant.
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INTRODUCTION

There is something strange to live in a country that is so heavily indebted to its
tragic origins. This country mired in blood. The sanguine violence of America's cardinal
sins of slavery and genocide has been so pivotal to the way that America was developed
that Black death seems to be its bedrock. When it comes to the development of capital in the
New World, nothing comes near to being as pivotal as Black death. This ever-present blood
has seeped into the day to day minutiae of American society in a way that is so present that
it can be invisible.

I am very familiar with dealing with loss. I had several close friends die from gun
violence at an early age. I have seen siblings consumed by penitentiary walls for years at a
time. As a young adult, I lost my mother to pancreatic cancer. Ten years later I lost my
father to colon cancer that spread throughout his body. I am sure that these experiences
placed me on this path towards dealing with mourning. I wish I could say that I dealt with
these tragedies gracefully, but that is not necessarily the truth. Yet, I’ve learned how to
gather the broken pieces of myself and find ways to stick close to family through times of
crisis. The rights that Americans so gladly admire can be measured in comparison to the
ones denied to those brought chained, indentured, indebted, or femme. It seems impossible
to purge the remaining stains of America’s peculiar institution. In our nation, the blackbody has been both simultaneously pivotal and expendable. When Black death is so present, how does one carry its weight? How is it memorialized?

**HOW DO WE MEMORIALIZE BLACK DEATH**

This country seems to hold contradictory views on how we memorialize Black death. We are a country whose citizens simultaneously brazenly fly confederate flags in the name of memorializing those who died to prolong the trade in flesh, while also advising the descendants of those who were sacrificed on the altar of capital to “get over it.” How present is Black death? How pivotal is it to the makings of the attainment of capital? How has King Cotton been linked to the financing of the industrial revolution? In this society, it seems pivotal to maintain a stance that is directed towards the future. This future-based orientation points towards progress, innovation, new products, as well as new markets. As long as we as a society maintain this future-based orientation, we will also repeat mantras such as let the past stay in the past. This past falls off like dried leaves fall from a plant. This forward facing perspective separates cause and effect. It pays little attention to what carries over from yesterday into today. As long as this fascination with the forward-facing advance of time continues, America won’t turn backward to connect the slave labor employed in this new nation to the market-driven financial and imperial regime that exists today.
We will no longer be able to view our country as perpetually linked to freedom, justice and secular righteousness if we stop and take a moment and consider the African concept of Sankofa. This concept, conceptualized as a bird with feet forward while looking backwards, means that one must look to the past in order to move forward. If we look at the foundations of genocidal Western expansion as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we will be able to connect the violence and forced labor of that history to the hegemony of Capital in our contemporary reality. We will no longer be able act as if White supremacy is some natural God-given phenomenon of Manifest Destiny.

If we connect this hegemonic wealth to its origins in slavery, we will realize that Black death is not merely an uncomely blemish on the face of our great nation. We will realize American hegemony of power and international wealth would be non-existent without Black death. Once we realize this, we will see that Black death is no longer locked away in the closet of antebellum plantations down South. It can be seen now on Wall Street, in the bricks and mortar of the Ivory Tower, and in all of the cultural phenomena that have been deemed as truly American. We also don’t have to look for Black death in our time in a figurative way. We can see it on our social media timeline, in our news cycles, and in the discourse of presidential campaigns.

"Though many believed that the election of President Barack Hussein Obama ushered in some post-racial era, we saw a series of filmed police-involved shootings that showed that a black face in a high place, in itself, could not miraculously undo what centuries of oppression did. As President Obama’s second term toiled on, it became increasingly clear that talk of a post-racial America was no more than cheap political punditry. A new generation of black Americans were, if anything, as emboldened by our black president as they were unsurprised by the failure of his election to usher in a fantasy period of racial healing. From the death of Oscar Grant on New Year’s Eve in 2009 after he was shot by a transit officer in Oakland, California, to the death of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 by the gun of neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, the headlines of the Obama era often
seemed a yearbook of Black death, raising a morbid and depressing quandary for black men and women: Why had the promise and potential of such a transformative presidency not yet reached down to the lives of those who elected him?” (They Can’t Kill Us All: the Story of the Struggle for Black Lives, p.15 by Wesley Lowery

It appears that we have moved from post-racial promise to an expanding spiral of Black death. Weekly, new hashtags alert us that another unarmed African American has been killed in the streets by police officers. Blacks fear for their lives over the sale of “loosie” cigarettes, stolen cigars, or jaywalking. Weekly we have been told about extrajudicial killings by prejudiced vigilantes, shooting teenagers for daring to listen to rap music, or for buying candy and iced tea from the neighborhood convenience store. As Ferguson and Baltimore burned, we had already entered a cycle of murder, outrage and videotaped death. If the murderers were arrested, the cycle of anticipation and disappointment continued as those charged got away with murder over and over. This happened in cities like Ferguson, where fiscal engines were fueled by arresting, convicting, and fining their disadvantaged and marginalized populations. The justice system has been weaponized and monetized against people of color, while it turns a blind eye on the very police that maintain this unbalanced system of profitable mass incarceration.

It appears that Black bodies and, interchangeably, Black death, serve a purpose when profitable, but as factories and mills have moved offshore, Black labor has become stagnant. Black bodies, while valuable, can also be expendable once they don’t serve a purpose to Capital and White supremacy. Turning on the news has proved that Black bodies are expendable. In Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, he illustrates how the police state serves to keep the very soul under a state of surveillance. Nothing could describe better the soul torture of watching the daily annihilation of your peers, the sight of bodies
that had survived treks through the villages to the ships, the sight of the blood of those who had survived the abominable state below decks, the memory of sisters and brothers whose lineages climbed and navigated their way on and off of auction blocks. These Black bodies have endured, those who made it out of the fields on antebellum plantations and, later on that same land, unpaid again, those who endured their servitude as sharecroppers. They survived. Dodging nooses, and dodging the cops in the Jim Crow North, the North that had seemed promised to be a new Canaan land. The cycle of Black death that triggered the Black Lives Matter movement weighed heavily on me. I was already painfully aware of the type of harassment, surveillance and police brutality that law enforcement inflicts on the community. I have not only been pulled over for "driving while black" many times, but also for bicycling while Black, and even walking while black. I have many family members who have lost many of their rights due to being convicted felons. Yet, the past few years have somehow been considerably different. I was constantly exposed to the videotaped murders of unarmed African-Americans at the hands of police officers. The constant barrage of these videos in the mainstream news cycles, and on social media, caused me to be extremely weary. I found myself consumed by my feelings of being helpless and powerless. As an artist who is concerned with social issues, I began to have doubts about the efficacy of making political artwork. I wondered whether or not I was able to affect change in the world through the making of art. Is it arrogant of me to think that is even possible? What can I do to honor those who have lost their lives? I began a two-pronged search for examples of artworks that were made to have a certain power to protect the community, as well as art that memorialized the dead. When it comes to art that is made to protect the
community, I began looking for West African power objects and discovered bocio sculptures.

**IN SEARCH OF A NEW MODEL OF ART MAKING**

"A bocio is not an object of sublime beauty; its surface is covered with what Michael Taussig would call "a "garbage heap" of matter ---- iron beads, straw, bones, leather, rags, pottery, fur, feathers, blood." (African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power, p. 1, Suzanne Prestion Blier). I have emulated this counter-aesthetic form of accumulation in my work. Rather than using natural materials related to spiritual power, I have incorporated a series of found, mass-produced materials. Repurposing these found materials I consider to exemplify the power of the artist to create new meaning. The community has a role in the artwork, connecting their stories and experiences to those that are tied to the memory of the object. These objects tell the tales of the lives of the previous owners, but also reflect on the history of industrial goods. These found materials are tied to mass production and all the activities that we do in service to Capital. The creators of the bocio statues deal with the powers of the spiritual realm, while I consider the secular power of elites; these two modes of thought influence each other in my work. While I previously felt powerlessness, I now find the studio to be a shrine where I can rebel, bind, subvert, and shred the powers that would inflict harm to my community. I create a space where the lifting up of a brush is enough to conjure light from the darkness.

I also look to places made sacred within the vernacular world, where people honor their loved ones. I reference the grassroots street-side memorials, as a place where people gather to pay their respect to the lost, but also to connect with others in [a sense of]
collective mourning. Like the bocio, these sites become a place where the slain can rest. Mourners’ street shrines deal with the sense of injustice when someone dies before their time. These sites can carry all of the weight of circumstances surrounding these deaths. They become political places of shared mourning, like the memorials set up to honor those killed at Columbine, or the one that was created when Princess Diana died. In Ferguson, after the shooting of Michael Brown, the roadside memorial that marked the site where he died was destroyed when it was run over by a car. Another roadside memorial at a nearby lamppost was burned down. These destructive acts speak to the spiritual power of these memorials, even among those who despise them.

These memorials are also similar to bocio in the way that they are, to an extent, assemblages. While bocio accretions accumulate various materials into one object, roadside memorials use a group mind, accumulating materials through the process of many people donating objects that gather over time. While I desire my work to reflect the surface texture and counter-aesthetic of the bocio, I compose my pieces with elements found in grassroots memorials, such as flowers, teddy bears, candles and bottles. The use of flowers in art has symbolic meaning and history that goes back to the 17th Century Dutch genre of Vanitas paintings. The Dutch usage of flowers pointed to the vanity and fleeting nature of life, and the inevitability of death. In my case, this sense of the inevitable is tied to state and extrajudicial violence, which now appears in the form of a continuous loop of new cases of shootings of unarmed citizens. I refer to this sense of the perpetuity of racial violence by using plastic flowers rather than live flowers that have a temporary lifespan.

As I constructed one of my pieces, ‘Pillar of Fire (Ibeji)’ (Fig 9), I wanted to combine the look of both grassroots memorials and the aesthetics of bocio sculptures. Also, key to
this work is the modality of appropriation and the reassignment of meaning. All these forms and processes are present in my decisions and cross-reference popular and traditional repurposing practices with modern or contemporary art practices. I thus structured the piece around a double baby stroller, using it almost as an armature. By using a double stroller, I reference the West African tradition that finds twins to be fortunate, and incorporates this belief around the pair of twin deities, known as Ibeji. I incorporate objects that are used in grassroots memorials, such as balloons, stuffed animals that fill the carriage, artificial flowers, as well as objects involved in bocio, such as locks and bells. The objects, covered in black gesso and paint, cover a towered substrate, with a canopy of long-stemmed flowers that extends in all directions, topped by a climbing bouquet of black balloons. The surfaces are layered with small hints of color, some added by dripping, others through a process of sanding that exposes layers of colored paint that lay beneath black painted layers. The piece itself is not just an object but a site, where objects are amalgamated in a manner that pulls each part into a more powerful whole. I use the height of the object to almost intimidate the viewer, but also to implicate the body. Between the wall pieces that surround this sculpture, and the height of the pieces, I wanted to create a locale that serves both as a place to mourn and a place to contemplate new possibilities. Key to this work is the modality of appropriation and the reassignment of meaning.

As I have been raising inquiries about my role as an artist, I came to make a distinction between the image making I take part in as a painter and the work that I did when I created collages. With the collages, I realized that the key ingredient, for me, was to make a distinction between the commercial intention and narrative behind the original
corporate advertisement, and my desire to create a new image and a new narrative. Though the images, or ingredients, may be literally the same, I was able to use a new context to cancel the original intent in a way that gave me a sense of power. At the end of the day, there is a labor that happens separate from the final product. This labor is the mental process of assigning meaning to the work. This labor is transformative, and is the active work when dealing with repurposing found materials in mediums such as collage and assemblage.

In the world of ritual, and the world of the creation of work such as bocio, the materials are selected using a combination of the meaning and power of the objects, such as the heat of habanero peppers, or the power of appealing to one’s vices by offering alcohol or cigar or cigarette smoke. Sometimes it involves medicinal properties of plants. Purpose and usefulness align with meaning. By taking these objects with inherent properties and combining them, the newly created objects are given power. This power, or ability to act, is the central aspect in many West African power objects. While I strive to respect the spiritual traditions of West African society, I create a distinction between the work that I reference and the work that I create.

The connection between the two is the power of the creator to assign value and power to the things that he creates. Though I engage with my related interest in honoring the deceased, I do not necessarily see myself as being involved in religious work. My interest in power is my response to apathy in the face of oppression. I imagine the studio as a cauldron where meaning is assigned. I see it as a place where things are nebulous and meant to be shifted and shuffled. In the studio, I find ways to pin down new meaning as work finds its appropriate form. The studio is a space where I experiment on myself, as I
move from a headspace of helplessness and move into having the studio be a place where power is created. If I can reorder and repurpose objects and meaning in images, what happens for the viewer? I desire to open possibilities for the viewer of the work to walk away with the ability to make her world a place where she can seize, appropriate, reassign meaning, and create new power dynamics based on the everyday moments of her lived experiences.

There is an importance in understanding the metaphor of political power and spiritual power. The West African, as well as African American, tradition holds a rich ongoing world view that is centered in spirituality. Centering my practice purely in African spirituality points the conversation perpetually towards heavenly matters in a way that indicates an unending pool of spiritual richness. By pointing the direction of the work, so to speak, towards political purposes, we move from a perspective of abundance and an embarrassment of spiritual riches, towards a void. The gains of American movements towards rights and empowerment of marginalized groups are constantly diminished and pushed towards a result that re-centers white supremacy at the heart of American culture and relentlessly avoids ceding power at all costs. White supremacy maintains itself by enforcing an image of society and a system of power that requires the domination and exploitation of the Other. That Other may be, among other identities, undocumented workers, underpaid service industry workers, underemployed former industrial workers, women who must live with being underpaid and shut out of leadership roles. Because the majority of the population consists of the exploited, ruled by an elite minority, it helps to assert subtle reminders of supposed superiority over the Other. This also keeps the focus of the White majority off of their own subjugation. This can be seen in how white voters
supported the election of the current president, across striations of age, class, geography, and gender. This seemed to happen against the larger interests of those voters, who instead seemed to desire the consolidation of the value of their own White identity. My practice, and the larger role of the creative class, is central to the ongoing political project and struggle. The question of whether political artwork is effective may be an ongoing question that is debated ad nauseam. It is unquestionable though, that the art studio is the epicenter of imagination. I am committed to the act of subverting corporate aspirations, realigning the world around me towards a vision of the world that I want to see.

As I create work centered in the politics for black lives, the work is indelibly tied to the viewer. If the art is rooted in the vernacular, in the lives of those who are meant to view the artwork, then their lives are a part of that creative process. It is imperative that the viewer becomes involved in the process of radical imagination. If there is any magic in the work I create, then that magic is to affect, revive, and invigorate the imagination of the viewer.

The regime in power in Washington demonstrates the limitations of the faith in the electoral process to bring about change for the masses. The Black community invested in chains of DNC elections, and hung their hopes on the first Black president. Problematically, we see that in a short amount of time, many of his legacy advancements have been undone with the stroke of a pen. If we are to create a world where Black Lives Matter, it must be done with a reinvigorated Black imagination. If one chooses to only use the solutions of advancement that the power structure approves of, that advice will only serve to maintain said power structures. Our votes are rarely responded to with governmental power being applied to fix the problems that our communities face. No. Even the first Black president
chided the Black community to play less video games, pull our pants up, and stop having kids out of wedlock. This narrative only props up conservative narratives that Black culture is pathological and is the source of all that ails us.

**RADICAL BLACK IMAGINATION**

If we are to create a society where Black Lives truly Matter, we must immerse ourselves completely into a radical black imagination. The foresight made available through the imagination must be seized and utilized, especially when faced with our current and ongoing political environment that has seemingly squashed a once audacious hope. The radical Black imagination must direct its strength to completely align all of the community’s energy towards developing a type of power that protects Black life. We must develop a sense of power that allows the energies exerted by the community to benefit that community, rather than supporting the same power structure that drains, abuses, and slaughters it. We must develop a vision that doesn’t purely exist as a counter-hegemonic one, but develop one that is centered in our power with the interests and traditions of the Black community. The radical Black imagination must identify no permanent allies or permanent enemies. The radical Black imagination will have to envision an economic arrangement that isn’t centered in exploitation. It must be developed to benefit all that take part in it, and circulate resources within the community that are currently diverted away from the community. When doors have been locked to us, the Black radical imagination must create exits. We must develop networks and allies according to our interests, as required by our own needs and situations. As I have decided to take resources, images, and materials from the world around me and reshape them by reassigning meaning, and place that meaning within a context of radical Black imagination, so in turn the viewer must take
a look at the world she lives in, and seize and appropriate what is needed, reassigning such resources to the needs of the community. Such a transforming process can create new meaning in the same way that I combine images and materials. For me, this is the endgame of how my imagination is must be applied.

An important part of my evolving imagery has been a result of deploying the concept behind the Ghanaian Twi word ‘Sankofa’ meaning “go back and get it”. The concept of Sankofa is crystallized in the Asante Adinkra symbols showing either a stylized heart shape or a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward, carrying a precious egg in its mouth. My effort to turn back, during my time in graduate school, has taken me to Havana, Cuba, on a class trip as well as having the grant-funded opportunity to travel on an extended trip throughout Benin. In Cuba, I found a society that is saturated with the culture of West African spirituality, represented by the syncretized religion of Santeria. I found a nation of people of color whose way of life illustrates a way of arranging a society built in the imagination of the People. It reminded me that there are other ways to structure a society and that I do not have to limit myself to an orientation with a societal power struggle entrenched in White Supremacy. It also showed me the value of joy, rather than embracing misery, in response to limited freedoms and options. I saw a system that isn’t just centered economically in its people, but is socially centered in the engagement between people and amongst neighbors. I saw a land that centers economic power in the hands of labor, rather than the managerial and executive class.

There were several connective threads between my trip to Havana and my trip to Benin. My trip to Benin was very much centered in the spirituality of the people there. I was surprised to see how much of the spiritual system and iconography I recognized from my
trip to Havana. The gods, icons, sculptures, status of religious leadership, and music that I found in Benin had been transplanted to Havana, and thrive there to this day, as I witnessed on my trip. Along with the narrative surrounding Black death in the Americas, lived the narrative that black gods, names, culture, and ancestry, had been erased or assimilated into the system of slavery. My trip to Cuba proved this myth to be false, and my trip to Benin confirmed to me, how much of the culture that survives in Havana, maintains itself in a whole, fully formed way. My process of Sankofa in Benin showed me a society that isn’t centered around the devastation of slavery or colonialism, but is connected to the ancestral heritage of its people. This heritage includes that of kingdoms that have lived in the area since time immemorial but also includes a history of migration that links the area around Benin, amazingly, to the exodus of African people out of Egypt upon the Roman invasion of Ptolemy. This showed me that Black people could be defined in the context of their own long history going back to the dawn of man, and that they need not always be framed by victimhood, and in the shadow of White Supremacy.

We live in the wake of tragedies, yet we also experience joy that carries us up and through. It is possible to reach beyond the space in which one simply exists, to learn how to hold the invisible just above our heads. We hold onto the whole-bodied laughter of friends. We watch the smile of babies and wonder, how much do they remember, crossing from the unknown into this world of ours? We share tenderness with those who seem to keep us afloat with their love. We carry a hope that death isn’t the end, and that our ancestors will be here to guide us. All they ask is that we remember their names.
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