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Identity Politics of Mobility:

Kara Walker and Berni Searle

i am accused of tending the past / as if i made it, / as if I sculpted it / with my
own hands. i did not. / this past was waiting for me / when i came, / a
monstrous unnamed baby, / and i with my mother's itch / took it to breast /
and named it / History.
(Clifton, 1991: 7)

How do we tend the violent past, the past of slavery, of apartheid? How do we remember what we did not experience, but without being victimised by those memories and their contemporary echoes? [1] In US Black Aesthetic poet Lucille Clifton's poem, women's bodies become the sites of creating not History herself, but the path on which History might walk into a future. In this essay, I am tracing how two contemporary artists of colour use echoes of embodiment in order to bring into presence historical events too easily forgotten in the archives of statistics, case numbers, generalisations. I argue that this embodied address becomes a method of pointing to the tending of History, to the act of involvement, engagement, and responsibility that binds all who witness the work. [2] Stillness, a pause, a holding on: these are the movement qualities that guide my exploration of the transmission of traumatic historical moments in the art work and critical reception of Kara Walker, a US artist working on slavery themes, and Berni Searle, a South African artist working in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The pause, the holding, becomes a movement echo, a kinaesthetic experience that translates itself across bodies, times and spaces. In this held breath of remembering, the past is born as History: both external and internal to a self, to a community, to the sharing that occurs in the act of witnessing an artist's work by her spectators.

By positioning my historical investigation in the realm of bodily movement and its arrest, i.e. with an emphasis on performance methods rather than postcolonial or slavery representation analysis, I am following a muscular tightness across repertoire and archive – the two interconnected ways of remembering Diana Taylor maps through her discussion of

performances of cultural memory in the Americas (2003). Taylor draws out the ways that memories of traumatic transgression arrive differently through these paths of transmission:

There is a continuum of ways of storing and transmitting memory that spans from the archival to the embodied, or what I have been calling a repertoire of embodied thought/memory, with all sorts of mediated and mixed modes in between. The archive . . . can contain the grisly record of criminal violence – the documents, photographs, and remains that tell of disappearances. But what happens, Yuyachkani [a Peruvian performance troupe, but also the Quechua word for embodied knowledge] asks, when there are no photographs, no documents, when even the bones lay scattered by the wayside? The repertoire, for them, holds the tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and invalid forms of knowledge and evidence. (Taylor, 2003: 192-3)

The archive and its practices of writing assemble, cite, and fix bodily function into schema and word. In black studies, the attention to the values of the everyday has greatly added to the materials in the archive: Jenny Sharpe, for instance, uses archival research combined with literary analysis to discuss Caribbean slave women's complex and complicated resistances during slavery in non-literary, non-autobiographical forms, such as court documents: absences of voice speak about narrational difficulties in colonial constructions of categories of "woman" and "slave" (2003). Likewise, Johnnie Stover traces bodily and everyday forms of resistances in her discussion of former slave women's life story writing: 'There is a physicality to the mother tongue ways of communicating a look, a set of the lips, a positioning of the hand, hip, and head. It is a stance, an attitude of resistance that includes secrets, misdirection, irony, song, humor, and lying among others' (Stover, 2003: 7).

In this essay, I present the archive as it is explored and arrested by another, interconnected, different form of historical transmission: the repertoires of movement, bodily reaction, blood flow, captured in art practice and made available as audience effects or in their embodied specificity. In this repertoire emerge bodily transmitted forms of knowledges, practices of the everyday, that remember obliquely what has gone before: histories of slavery, histories of the subjugation of women, histories of oppression all focused on sanctioned interpretation of specific bodies.

Like the Yuyachkani troupe, I also have to deal with my own positioning within this framework: whence comes my authority to speak, as a white disabled US immigrant who writes in her second language, and writes here for a non-US audience? Writing in a well-explored heritage, Jean Wyatt has drawn attention to the complex web of fantasies, identifications, distances, warnings, and performances that occur in cross-racial feminist encounters, and fantasies do indeed have currency in this essay (Wyatt, 2004). And my interest in the communicability of the bodily might be problematic, given the issues of skin and projection that potentially accompany white people's visions of non-white people. But my reading mechanisms emerge

from a different site of identification – my location in disability culture, and from disability culture’s own struggles with victimisation, visibility, projection, and a necessarily complex approach to lost histories. Thus, without “cripping” the artists I discuss, I want to draw attention to the solidarities and differences that can occur within dialogues where different medicalising and scientific categorisations intersect with issues of identity and self-determination. [3]

The other problem with aesthetic strategies of remembering through representation aligns with a function Primo Levi described, the crystallisation of victim and perpetrator into stereotypes that layer themselves over experience:

a memory that is recalled too often and that is expressed in verbal form tends to set as a stereotype – a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, and adorned – which settles in place of the raw record and grows at the expense of the original memory. (Levi, 1986: 130-1)

With no access, both historically and theoretically, to “original memories” and full experience, contemporary writers such as Taylor shape a force field between the need to remember, the ethics of remembering, and the efficacy of remembering for political action. Marianne Hirsch investigates ‘postmemory’ as forms of intersubjective spectatorial identification with historic people, in the context of Germans (like myself), born after the Second World War. ‘Postmemory’ aims at a delimited knowing to avoid stereotyping or assimilation (i.e. thinking one ‘knows’ the other, or even ‘becomes’ the other), while allowing an ethical relationship to the past (Hirsch, 1998: 8-10). My own location in disability culture offers this lived tension between finding a group, a label, and leaving a space of unknowability, a space of encounter outside the crystallised certainties of representation.

My desire to find touch-traces that can interrupt or question the archive and its historical violences fuels this essay: moving within the problematics of being identified and defined by others, finding space and time to breathe without losing the specificity of the past and its political charge. It is within all these representational uncertainties that I still want to move forward, since I hold the work of remembering in uncertainty to be valuable, and politically efficacious.

Taylor acknowledges the power of performance as episteme and praxis: as ways of knowing, ways of storing knowledge, ways of making new knowledges and new maps of relationships. In the art work I discuss, these questioned and embodied knowledges move.

Remembering Trauma: Kara Walker

The Holocaust is the prime historical site for the exploration of the Unspeakable, as a site *from which* even if not *of which* knowledge emerges, knowledge that binds witnesses into ethical relations. The mass murder of Jews, gay people, Roma and Sinti, disabled people and many

more in the everyday life of Germany stuns the imagination. And yet, atrocity, grief, the everyday-ness of cruelty, dehumanisation and the systematic subjugation and killing of people, eradicating them from the record of “humanity”, are historic realities for many regions. In the US context, the warfare against Native populations is one such site of atrocity, and another one lies in the many practices of slavery. How to remember the dislocation of people(s), their use as cattle and work force, and how to address these practices’ deep impact on contemporary race relations and social structures are fraught issues, and many charge that amnesia is a prevalent condition. Ashraf Rushdy adds that this remembering of the Unspeakable of slavery’s history needs to be balanced:

it is equally important for us to recognize the ways life does and did go on, particularly for those who suffered but survived the institutions described in these works. There is a danger of neglecting the dailiness of the lives of the people who lived through slavery and the concentration camps, the danger that arguing for a historical break means either denying the small joys and recurring sorrows of those individuals who lived through it or forgetting what, to appropriate a phrase by Hannah Arendt, we can call the “banality of evil,” the terrifying normalcy of human suffering wrought of human desires for hierarchy, cruelty, supremacy. (Rushdy, 2001: 4)

And the daily-ness of life, and acts of living, intersect with Taylor’s repertoire, Michel de Certeau’s practices of everyday life (1984) and other attentions to the problematic and partial othering of dominant discourse.

Holocaust memory and the Vietnam war were some of the US sites of a deep engagement with traumatic memory, and in a post-9/11 framework, issues of witnessing, remembering and survival have again become themes in US popular culture. But there is still no museum dedicated to slavery in the US (although one is finally in development, its mission embattled), and people of all colours often seem eager to “leave well alone.” As W.J.T. Mitchell puts it, slavery is the secret in the Nation’s founding that marks ‘what we think we know, what we can never forget, and what seems continually to elude our understanding’ (1994: 200).

Fears of revictimisation, of a reinscription of race as a marker of a fixed identity, and of further stirring up race wars that are already too well fuelled often hinder engagement. It is against this background that Kara Walker’s work has become controversial *and* celebrated as a US artist, a black artist, a woman artist, a “young American artist”, and an artist.

Kara Walker’s practice deals obliquely with slavery and the plantation: women’s abjection, the impossibility of representation, the violation of privacy by naming/showing the “victim”, the exhortation to remember – and then move on. And the vocabulary she uses is that of the repertoire: hysteria, fantasy, the strange convolutions of desire and imagination at the site of the wounding, and in the intricacies of half-hidden memory.



Figure 1. Kara Walker, 'Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart', 1994 Cut paper and adhesive on wall. 180 x 600 inches (15 x 50 feet). 396.2 x 1524 cm

(View of the exhibition *Kara Walker Mon Ennemi, Mon Frère, Mon Bourreau, Mon Amour* at ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, June 20 - September 9 2007. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York)

Walker rose to prominence in the art world in the 1990s, and gained significant visibility with her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial and with a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1997. Her best-known works to-date are large scale installations of black silhouette cut-outs, referencing black and white people in period dress during the plantation-era US South, with characters depicted in acts including sadomasochistic torture, murder, and child/adult sex. Indeed, 'demeaning', 'farce', 'abject' are the terms many commentators use to describe the effects of this presentation (see for instance Farrington, 2005: 227; Hobbs and Walker, 2002: 38). But the installations are intricate and the images gorgeously flowing, rounded and pleasing to the eye as objects. They reveal their upsetting character only on closer inspection, once the black-on-white patterns are decoded. The silhouette presentation requires the audience to interpret, interpolate, add to and create the scenarios that then upset them: these are not naturalistic representations, but shadows.

Walker's technique references the ornament and the filigree. Blood spouts in patterns that are reminiscent of art deco, and intricate patches of grass, moss and trees frame many of the images like elements in ancient grotesque borders (remembering the origin of the word 'grotesque', the grotto). To me, these elements of Walker's work make the look possible: they are not exactly distancing elements, or "beautifications" of the horror of what is on offer, but they

make the presentation exactly that: a presentation, an image, a translation, a memory recorded. They allow a pause, before the turn away. A pause, a slowing down, a point of silence, as my eye untangles dress from body, grass from faecal matter, blood from water, and “reads” the scene. These are neither photo-realistic captures, nor actually identified scenes. Instead, they marry art historical practices (silhouettes, grotesque conventions, the ornamental, the panorama) with the audience address of the installation: an invitation to the viewer to see herself as involved, to be an embodied eye taking in images in the round (a perception Walker heightens by using projection in some of her work, literally throwing the viewer’s shadow onto the wall to join the cut-outs). The body of the spectator, turning to see and to decode, is a necessary part of the presentation.

This emphasis on embodied perception is supplemented by other repertorial forms of knowledge. They include the subtleties of fantasy and imagination surrounding black hypersexuality and sexual availability that haunt white and non-white America’s popular representations. Half-remembered images of *Birth of a Nation* (W.B. Griffith, 1915) and other racist depictions supplement the archival knowledge of slavery’s brutal regime. [4] These are sites of encounters between different knowledges. The popular cultural representations that themselves build on now discarded race science intersect with the “authority” of history, the righteous documentaries on the History channel. The repertoire taints the archive, and the archive is beset by strange doublings and memories of “what once was true.”



Figure 2. Kara Walker, 'Slavery! Slavery!', 1997 Cut paper and adhesive on wall 11 x 85 feet. (View of the exhibition *Kara Walker Mon Ennemi, Mon Frère, Mon Bourreau, Mon Amour* at ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, June 20 - September 9 2007. Photo : Florian Kleinfenn, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York).

Walker's art practices are deeply contested: well-known black artists such as Betye Saar accuse her of making her career on the backs of her people's trauma

– in a PBS documentary, *I'll Make Me a World*, Saar accused Walker's work of being 'revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves . . . basically for the amusement and the investment of the White art establishment' (PBS, 1999). [5]

Art historian Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw offers many compelling analyses of these silhouettes as traces of the Unspeakable of slavery, as she reads them as sites of rememory, as reenactments of multiple stories, actively recycled. Shaw's own critical activity partakes in this cycle: she becomes an excavator of material, visuals, stories, that she weaves into the openings left by Walker. In one of Walker's pieces, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, a cluster of figures present young black women half-disrobed suckling on each other's breasts, with an infant left out of the circle of nourishment. Shaw describes the layering of historical background into this image: she cites Sethe's infanticide in Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, an archival photo of a half-naked slave woman named Delia, which was once used as visual rhetoric for the inferiority of African people, and a memoir by a former slave, a wetnurse. Shaw then re-sees these historical moments in the black holes of Walker's installation:

The 'stories' of these three women . . . are 're-remembered' in the half-naked, fervently nursing female slaves of Walker's installation. Their fictionalized, imagined, and remembered emotions of pain, anger, and humiliation over the abuse of their enslaved black female bodies are present as ghostly specters in the silhouette characters, as shadowy icons of death that have been resurrected to haunt the living. (Shaw 2004: 47)

Haunting and ghosting are familiar tropes in relation to slavery's ongoing presence. Caroline Rody writes about Morrison's Sethe and the project of *Beloved* that 'cannot recover the "interior life" of slaves, but by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, it portrays that "interior" place in the African- American psyche where a slave's face still haunts' (2001: 25). [6]

Shaw also offers psychoanalytically informed readings of Walker's work, which she sees as a making visible of the unspeakable. I want to draw attention to Shaw's critical activity. Clearly, for her, Walker's installation gives permission for addition, for an improvisation of research and insertion. What emerges in Shaw's book on Walker is a form of collaboration (although Shaw does not draw specific attention to this mechanism). Although sometimes skirting close to a literal reading of the images as representations rather than paper patterns, she does not state "this image is about this incident." Instead, her research rhymes with the images, draws inferences, harmonises, improvises. Walker's work emerges as a site of enmeshment, an offer to discourse, a place of halves and holes, offering a space within which to hold personal and cultural stories of traumatic content.

Stories can find anchor – and can become trapped. Mobility and stillness continue to be guiding metaphors for this memory work. The installation becomes a haunted house, ready to admit ghosts – but whether to let them howl above the heads of the living, or whether to let them have space to be, is left to the viewer. [7] Curator Annette Dixon, introducing Walker's exhibit *An Abbreviated Emancipation (from the Emancipation Approximation)* at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002, draws attention to this spatial dimension of memory, ghosting, and architecture in the sites of art and their heritage, when she claims that the placement of the art in 'the neoclassical setting of the Apse [of the museum] evokes the grand architecture of antebellum Southern plantations' (Dixon, 2002: 11). [8] So who(m) do audiences perform as and for, as they walk among these shadows? Maybe some footfalls become arrested, as audiences listen to their own echo, in the cavernous apse that folds in on itself, and back into history.

Rhythmic Identity Politics

Art historian Donald Kuspit offers a severe critique of Walker, framed within an attack of 'identity politics art'. In a review of the 2003 *Kara Walker: Excavated from the Black Heart of a Negress* on the website artnet.com, he criticises Walker's art project, and the project of identity politics art, citing Adorno's critique of jazz as his foil. Since his argument is symptomatic of a tradition of argumentation against identity politics art, I will quote the entire passage:

But her work, however artistically eloquent, remains haunted by T. W. Adorno's dialectical view of the jazz performer:

It is well known that jazz is characterized by its syncopated rhythm, thus by a displacement which inserts apparent beats within the regular measures, comparable to the intentionally clumsy stumbling of the eccentric clown, familiar enough from the American film comedies. A helpless, powerless subject is presented, one that is ridiculous in his expressive impulses. Now the formula of jazz is this, that precisely by virtue of his weakness and helplessness this subject represented by the irregular rhythms adapts himself to the regularity of the total process, and because he, so to speak, confesses his own impotence, he is accepted into the collective and rewarded by it. Jazz projects the schema of identification: in return for the individual erasing himself and acknowledging his own nullity, he can vicariously take part in the power and the glory of the collective to which he is bound by this spell.

Ironically, the relentless, intimidating, assertive blackness of Walker's work seems to represent this self-erasure and nullity. The imperious blackness is the abyss of history, internalized by suffering – black or otherwise – and as such an ironical source and marker of identity. Identity politics art is ultimately about the failure of identity, for if identity is defined entirely in terms of collective history and ideological oppression, it is a confession of self-alienation. (Kuspit, 2003; citing Adorno, 1972: 113).

In this critique, Walker's problem as an artist is her problem to find "her own voice" outside the cushy, fallen-short voice of slave people. Words like 'self-erasure and nullity' echo other critiques of Walker's work, which use psychobiographic analyses to show how her work rehearses Walker's own abjection, and her supposed personal problems of coming to terms with her black identity. Walker's performance of self in the intertexts of her work, the publicity materials and interviews, present a wide range of personal data on which to base such analyses, but only if one is willing to take these utterances at "face value." If one ascribes even slight performative and ironical tendencies to this artist who emerged at the same time as many other artists whose voices are "postmodern", inflected, deadly playful (such as much the YBA group, Young British Art, for instance), these "straight" readings become problematic. [9]

Kuspit grounds his critique in the citation of the modern canon: Adorno's work on jazz is canonical as a critique of US mass culture, and it is as part of this critique that Adorno writes his essay 'On Jazz' (Adorno 2002; 1932), where he describes jazz as 'music of the slaves' (Sklavenmusik) and symptomatic for a degraded US popular culture, in particular a culture of white trash (Lumpenproletariat) where no one thinks for 'himself' and commodification rules the minds of all. 'Music of slaves' becomes 'slavery under commodification' by extension. [10] It does not take much analysis to see some European hauteur beneath this equation, and Kuspit's citation takes on a different life against this. [11] The critique, then, is against identity politics as a form of commodification, as something that stands in the way of the free, self-directed artist asserting "herself" – and in the tradition of putting "herself" and "artist" together, the lines of counter-argument are already becoming clear. Feminist art practice has not easily embraced the "individual, clear, separate" artist identity modernity has bequeathed to it. But instead of using this line of well-known argumentation against this particular Adornian critique, I want to change the grounds of this analogous discussion of identity politics by pointing to other discussions of African-derived music traditions that deal more analytically with the specific forms that uniformity and individual expression take.

The call-and-response is a major characteristic of many African musical forms, and influenced African-American musical development. John Chernoff writes in 1979 about the forms that complexity and appreciation take within this call-and-response, and although he does not cite Adorno specifically, his critique responds to Adorno's style and genre:

In African music, the chorus or response is a rhythmic phrase that recurs regularly; the rhythms of a lead singer or musician vary and are cast against the steady repetition of a response. In essence, if rhythmic complexity is the African alternative to harmonic complexity, the repetition of responsive rhythms is the African alternative to the development of a melodic line.

Jones writes that an African 'would find our broad changes of melody coarse and inartistic . . . He knows the artistic value of a good repetitive pattern.' (Chernoff 1979: 55)

Kuspit used Adorno's musical analysis of jazz as a way to argue for identity politics as a site where individual voices retreat against the safe, homogenous mass. As a non-musicologist, I want to use historical musicology to argue for the opposite: there is something vital and vitalising in the interaction between community and individual voice weaving a rhythmic web. [12] Identity as overlap, as call and response, not as a full elision, but as a shadowing: this is the kind of identity politics I see as the background to Kara Walker's work.

With this, my understanding of identity politics is not of something reified, unmoving, portentous, but something that invites movement. And within this rhythmic identity politics, the pauses and stillnesses in my reception of Walker's work are more than just the absence of movement/music: they are an incursion into the rhythm, creating moments that are both outside and inside the ongoing production, altering the beat.

Preceding Adorno and his set-up of the debate in 1932 (when 'On Jazz' first appeared, five years before his first visit to the US), voices of the African-American slave community already pointed to these strengths of specific aesthetic awareness. An unnamed former slave woman interviewed by ethnographer Jeanette Robinson Murphy for an article on African-American folk music published in 1899 captures the difference between the different musical aesthetics: 'Notes is good enough for you people, but us likes a mixtery' (Murphy 1899, cited by White and White, 2005: 51). White and White discuss this meaning of 'mixtery':

It seems likely . . . that in juxtaposing the words 'notes' and 'mixtery,' the woman had more than lyric content in mind, that the 'notes' she deemed 'good enough' for whites referred to the sounds of a relatively simple tune sung in a straightforward manner, whereas the 'mixtery' preferred by blacks was the more complex sonic texture of the slave spiritual, with its overlapping rhythms, sharp timbal contrasts, and liberal tonal embellishment. (2005: 52)

This discussion of mixtery, call and response, rhythm and movement/stillness aligns with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls signifying or signifyin' (1988).

Signifyin' refers to particular African-American and African-derived linguistic practices, elaborate verbal plays, which Gates links to the contemporary US practices of calling out, rapping, and testifying, as well as to Esu and other tricksters of different African mythologies.

Signifyin' is a play on the limit of the "correct", the hegemonic. As colonial subjects, black people in the US may experience the double consciousness W.B. Du Bois talked about so eloquently in 1903:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1990; 1903: 9)

Signifyin' addresses this discomfort in one position, this improvisation against victimhood, and becomes the linguistic marker of the will to survive. Signifyin' becomes the repertorial use of the archive, a performance of its epistemological methods, the dislocation of the fact in its citation, the questioning of a book's authority by copying it, and by the swing of hand writing the new line. Black becomes "black", neither disposed as an old marker of a difference now no longer understood (by the "new" science still remarkably beholden to its forefathers) to be a binding "biological" marker, nor fully embraced as a name of a shared state that can offer certainty, belonging, and coherence. Instead, "black" references across this field, offering a repertoire of behavior that refuse to be archived or archivable as certainty.

These identity politics move, jump and cut, precisely because the identity in question has been immobilised, dissected, anatomised and caught by a dominant culture that still bases its linguistic practices and schemes for understanding the world on the historical stillness of bodies that provided the necessary othering. These stillnesses are the dead bodies on anatomy tables, "proving" black inferiority, the stillness of a head held within the measuring instruments of phrenology, "showing" low intelligence, the stillness of the anthropological subject caught by the flash of the photograph, "presenting" otherness and difference, and the stillness of the freakshow display, unable to "move" into humanity. To evacuate that identity into a postmodern fiction of total mobility is clearly impossible. The identity politics of mobility instead become a weaving, a rhythm on the limits of stillness and movement.

As a member of disability culture, a differently named, differently constituted, but similarly haunted "identity group" trapped too easily into defining medical categories, I do not wish to leave identity politics and its tactics behind when searching for practices that remember "culturally explainable" atrocities. In his critique of Walker, Kuspit looked back onto a historical moment of "liberty" long passé and never fully available to anybody but the elite. To those on whose bodies the elite built its riches (or whose disabled bodies the elite used to define what they were not, or else chose to eradicate in the eugenics movement) this freedom will likely always be suspect. But this problematised freedom lures and plays across the imagination and the fantasy like Walker's shadows do.

Bruised Images: Berni Searle

In my discussion of Walker's work I privilege the fact that she does not explicitly display the bruised body in her work. It is the opening of the cut, the hole that isn't fully determined, and the blood shadow as ornament that makes her work bearable, and allows the critical labour of the witness. It is also this opening that allows her, in *Cut* (1998), to present a form of self-portrait with cut wrists. This silhouette was a response to a photo shot of Walker as a graduate student in Providence, Rhode Island: jumping in the air, caught in suspension, between the pulls of gravity and muscular energy. The silhouette cut is a floating billowing shape with surreal faces emerging in the fullness of the bunching skirt, and a blob below the figure, dark stains of blood which are unconnected to the ornamental spouts that leave her wrists. In this floating, Walker herself is present and absent: it is a self-portrait that aligns her with a historical suffering, but doesn't collapse her pain with those of others whose pain was different. To the stories of slavery, Walker can offer a fantastical home, a repository, but not a place of rest. Her stilling of motions into shadows, and her stilling of the spectator's gaze, do not offer solicitude. My eyes wander to another cut, another violation, and the stories continue to press in, creating a halting rhythm of shock and flow.

Walker's oblique dealing with the fantasies and traumas of slavery, and the pervasiveness of amnesia surrounding the specific transgressions that ruled slavery plantation life, provides one view of representing racialised and gendered violence in ways intertwined with the minor key, the relativised vocabulary, the everyday knowledges of the repertoire. South African artist Berni Searle provides a different perspective on the presence of the bruised and cut female body of colour. In her work, the pause, arrest and immobilised stillness is literalised, or rather, made flesh. Searle comments on witnessing, gendered and racialised trauma and the politics of representation – and she does this by immobilising her body's tissues to offer visual evidence of invisible trauma. In a series of photographs, *Discoloured*, 1999-2000, Searle stains parts of her body with henna and various spices. She then puts a glass plate on these parts, and applies (or lets someone apply) pressure. An assistant makes photographs through this glass plate, capturing the folds of pressured and coloured tissue in a semblance of bruised flesh.

In these photographs, blood is arrested, cut off, in memory of violence that bruises (more than) bodies. Blood recedes. The skin blanches. This is not a reenactment of a traumatic past: there is nothing literal to this act, no naturalised representation of a bruised body emerges. Instead, Searle's body reacts with its repertoire of bodily actions, offering its response to environmental conditions and intrusions. To the blood vessel, the origin of the abrupt compression is secondary. The automatic, non-voluntary repertoire of bodily function readily enables its performance. Her body remembers what to do. And this formal clarity, this 'distance' intermingles with the array of colours and wrinkled flesh that the camera captures. The staining black henna indeed "performs" the colours of bruising, but it also offers a different historical memory, differently located in Searle's bodily 'colour'. Her use of henna and spices to colour her body references 'the spice trade which brought white colonists to the Cape of Good Hope

in the seventeenth century, and in interbreeding with the local inhabitants and slaves brought from other parts of Africa, produced children of mixed race, or “Coloured” (from unpublished artist’s statement). Metaphor and literalities of colour and (blood) stains become visible in the flesh. Searle’s body touches and is touched by multiple histories: colonial trade-routes, slavery practices, race discourses and their political effects, African feminism(s), the “body art” fashion in the contemporary Western art market, and the renaissance of art practice in the wake of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission work.

The TRC provides an alternative to the work on ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’, dealing with the past, transmission and trauma in relation to the remembering of the Holocaust, or the remembering of the Disappeared of Argentina. Established in 1996 under Chair Desmond Tutu, it tried to find ways of honouring the experiences under Apartheid rule, and to find a visible and symbolic means to address atrocities. Tutu speaks about this mission in his opening statement to the hearings:

We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past, to lay the ghosts of that past so that they will not return to haunt us. And [so] that we will thereby contribute to the healing of a traumatised and wounded people – for all of us in South Africa are wounded people – and in this manner to promote national unity and reconciliation. (1996)

Writings about the TRC stress the resulting clash of media spectacle and the requirements of privacy, the problems about speaking out and testifying, and the inadequacy of words as symbols of pain and guilt. In particular, the use made of testimony has become an issue of contestation – pain and trauma are highly valued commodities in the international market place, and art practice within this realm always has to question its ethics. Anthropologist Fiona Ross writes about ethical use of witness statements:

Testifiers have expressed anger that their testimonies appear (often unacknowledged) in poet-journalist Antjie Krog’s book about the Commission, *Country of My Skull* (1998). Some feel they revealed more than they wanted to at the public hearings from which Krog draws their testimonies.

Others feel that in writing about pain, Krog appropriates it, translates it from their experience to hers, and takes unauthorized ownership of their ‘stories’. Their concerns indicate the ease with which experience can be subsumed, and the sense of loss that may result. (Ross, 2005: 103)

Telling stories heard within the public fora of the new nation state becomes problematic, and potentially a renewed form of violence. “Public” acknowledgement of the experiences of violence is not necessarily the answer to the reintegration of history, present and future in the people who experienced traumatic events. In this framework, visual art became a rich vein of

expression, reinforcing the themes of the TRC while questioning its reliance on “the court of law” as a primary mode of testimony. [13]

These histories and visual practices weave through the net of folds Searle’s body creates in response to pressure. Her body becomes a palimpsest of testimonials, of witnessing, without fixing them in the experiences of the artist herself, or literalising specific instances. “Trauma” and its simultaneous incitation to/refusal to speak emerges in the complexity of these webs, the shifting, temporary nature of these tissue-trauma lines in her hands and the soles of her feet. I can read these as references to traditional areas of punishment in many cultures, historic and contemporary. They become the repertorial expression of archival lines of public violence. I can also see the photos of her soft belly and back as references to the fact that these areas are oftentimes targets of domestic violence perpetrators working “in private”, careful not to leave “visible” traces on those they brutalise.

These areas of bodily trauma read differently in different cultures, and Kim Miller discusses Searle’s art specifically in relation to the TRC (as well as the ongoing high rates of rape in post-Apartheid South Africa). In this context, the bodily blanching and staining read much more specifically to someone who knows the particular cruelties of the South African regime – and knows them as a co-citizen, rather than as someone who reads descriptions in witness statements of the court. Miller sees “necklacing” in a photo in which the soft parts of Searle’s upper back are blanching against the constraining glass plate. Necklacing was the name given to a killing practice aimed at women: a gasoline-soaked tire thrown around the neck and set on fire, often employed against a woman who was the wife or girlfriend of an enemy (Miller, 2005: 49). Likewise, Miller sees in these areas not the stories of domestic violence abuse that immediately become visible to me, but sexual assaults against women political prisoners. Miller argues that Searle makes visible the crimes against women during the Apartheid years; those which were most frequently absent from the TRC hearings. Another reading, here of Searle’s practices in creating the photographs, speaks about the brutality of witnessing:

As a body positioned uncomfortably beneath glass, it appears as if this violated body is being manipulated and scrutinized even further . . . Here, as Searle alludes to the revictimization that many women experience during courtroom testimony, she makes a reference to the uncomfortable environment of the TRC for survivors of sex crimes. (Miller, 2005: 49)

These differences in reading the images speak of context, and of the locally and historically particular intersecting stories of archive and repertoire on a woman’s manipulation of tissue. I read the juxtaposition of bodily reaction and stories of violence against women, with her body both abstract and yet embodied, preceding and yet enabling narratives – and, most importantly to me in my narrative in this essay, able to repair itself. This performance is repeatable. This body is alive: condensation from the warm body clouds the glass in some of the photographs. [14] The blood will flow again – back into these blanched areas, but also, again, in the streets

of cities and rural areas all over the world, and, more likely than not, in the name of racialised superiority. To Miller, these images of a body in (some) physical distress speak about the horrors of witnessing: the undressing, violence, invasion that is the enabling feature of the archive, ripping stories from people. And it is this attention to the violence of archiving that stills my fingers on my keyboard often as I am trying to find ways of telling untold stories, and as I draw attention to embodied, touched witnessing, my repertorial inflection of archival material. But there is a richness here, too, as there was in Walker's work: a productivity, a weight and heft to this living body.

Searle offers us perspectives on bodies that throw shadows on silhouetted cuts, these silhouettes which didn't just provide entertainment to Victorian living rooms, but also became base-material on which phrenology could build its science of racial inferiority. Her work, which walks a different problematic path on the edge of a conflatory pit in which her body "becomes" the victim, nevertheless offers us different sights, and signals at the presence of the wound as a place of transition: blood will flow, again.

Conclusion

With Walker's curlicues at the site of the profile, and Searle's rounding and transversal of her body's presence in space as three-dimensional object, these artists touch pasts, and use performative elements to draw attention to traumatic ruptures. These pasts are each specific (and yet clearly interrelated in their positioning of race and gender), and the representations do justice to the complexity of the systems that gave birth to the specific brutalisations remembered here, and to the connections between these pasts and the present. But neither of these artists takes a sure stance, presents a clear vision: they respect in different ways the privacy of the people who serve as objects of their historical inquiry. While these artists mobilise archives, using archival information to weave bodily forms, emotions and sensations together, they do not create inverted incubi, ghosts that lose their own historic identity as their subject-positions are occupied by contemporary bodies. By paying attention to the shifting grounds of the embodied echoes and responses to pasts, these artists create a politics of embodiment that goes beyond identification and usurpation. Rhythm, flow, and continuation drive an identity politics that needs to tell its stories, and yet refuses the caught-ness of dominant signification. These identities are performed, not static, and life and death weave a pattern. These artists stake a claim, locate themselves within the archive, and make me feel that History is born in the breath of the living.

Endnotes

[1] And already the project becomes complex: is this history past, or are there many who not only remember, but experience in the flesh slavery – and the potential disempowering narrative of neoslavery, with its demand for (impossible) flight? Prison systems, systemic health care inequalities and

many other sites of structural racism make any statement about the pastness of slavery problematic. This essay works within this tension with a deeply riven sense of a “we” of remembering, and the pastness of the past.

[2] Clifton’s poem, and this question of how to remember in positivity, features in Caroline Rody’s study of the birthing of new daughters, un- and re-making history in African American and Caribbean women’s writing. Rody writes about a historiographic desire, ‘the desire of writers newly emerging into cultural authority to reimagine their difficult inheritance, the stories of their own genesis’ (Rody, 2001: 4).

[3] This essay emerged as part of the research for a performance project on affective movement, storytelling and art practice, where I am investigating visual and performance work about disabled black women during plantation slavery, focused on the medical practices of J. Marion Sims, “the father of gynaecology.” See The Anarcha Anti-Archive and Petra Kupperts’ ‘Remembering *Anarcha*: Objection in the Medical Archive’, *Liminalities* 4.2 (2008). <http://liminalities.net/4-2>.

[4] And it is no accident that this film springs to mind: DJ Spooky’s performances of a remix, *Rebirth of a Nation*, confronts contemporary viewers with the starkness of the stereotypes of racialised encounters. According to him, seeing the film head-on unmasks the crude and inelegant stereotyping, and helps to drain their power. And yet – in his performance talks, Spooky explains how the Ku-Klux-Klan still uses the film as a recruiting device. Another interesting reason why this film is the first I think of is Griffith’s standing as one of the early filmmakers focused on disability imagery. As Martin Norden writes, Griffith directed at least fourteen movies for Biograph focusing on physical disability (1994: 41). In these films, disability is a sign of stigma, something that marks suffering, and disabled people are either side-figures or in need of rescuing.

[5] This reluctance to show even traces of victimhood in (some) histories of black cultural production, and the problems that emerge from it, are articulated by Trudier Harris who, in her analysis of four decades of black literature, calls attention to the ‘pathology of strength’ (2001: 67): the psychic and health-related toll strong black women in black literature have to pay for their strength, and the toll paid by their families and environments.

[6] The image of haunting and ghosting is central to many literary analyses of slavery writings. Jenny Sharpe calls her study *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives* (2003), echoing Morrison’s call for a literary archaeology of unarchived lives, imaginative recreations that help to lay to rest unhonoured lives.

[7] This image of the haunted house instead of the rational memory palace of the renaissance emerges from W.J.T. Mitchell’s essay ‘Narrative, Memory, and Slavery’ (1994).

[8] Walker herself refers to the architectural specificity of art spaces she has worked in, for example the Carnegie, and these spaces’ classical heritage, in an interview with Thelma Golden (2002: 43).

[9] One example of this double-voiced play on essentialism and ironic referencing seems at work in a statement Walker made about the breast-suckling images discussed above. She says about these images: ‘History. My constant need ... to suckle from history, as though history could be seen as a seemingly

endless supply of mother's milk represented by the big black mammy of old' (cited by Armstrong, 1997: 113). Strange (m)othermilk, indeed.

[10] Critiques of Adorno's discussion of jazz abound, and it is necessary to be careful in asserting racism here: the layers of discussion and substitution are complex. For a discussion of these issues, see Steinman (2005). For excavatory, scholarly approaches to the actual music, sound production and assertion of African-American slaves, see White and White (2005).

[11] In the title of his critique, Kuspit cites the cakewalk as one of the origins of Walker's aesthetic: look, how intricate, give me a prize – Adorno also cites the cakewalk as one of the forms of degraded, non-authentic artforms.

[12] And call-and-response as a form echoes strongly through African-American criticism – see for instance the volume edited by Patricia Liggins Hill, *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998), which uses the term as its title, and which uses an accompanying CD to break the notion that the "literary" excludes orality and sound transmission.

[13] Examples include the exhibition *Fault Lines*, on the role of the artist in the TRC process, Cape Town, 1996. In the US, the first main exhibit of post-apartheid art from South Africa was *Claiming Art/Reclaiming Space*, at the National Museum of African Art, 1999.

[14] This issue is highlighted in Annie Coombes' discussion of Searle's work, where she also draws on issues of 'visibility' and 'transparency' to present Searle's work within the forcefield of racialising science and the resulting race hierarchies (2001: 184).

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994

Figure 2 Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery!*, 1997

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