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Desire of Pornotroping: Epistemological, Affective and Aesthetic Matrix of White Innocence

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Abstract

In this article, we mobilize a theoretical and political critique to the aesthetic and affect that informs “white innocence” and its attempts at “witnessing” the pain of the Other. Engaging with the work of Black critical race theorists (most prominently, Hortense Spillers and Amber Jamilla Musser), we put the artistic interventions of Hannah Black and Parker Bright critique of Dana Shutz’s “Open Casket” in conversation with Teresa Margolles’s “Vaporization.” In doing so, we explore the epistemological, affective and aesthetic dimensions of the *desire* of whiteness to *transcend* its own matrix of race-power.

We argue that Black’s and Bright’s interventions are refusals to accept or be the object of the *desire* for redemption, collaboration, and recuperative forgiveness. Margolles’s Vaporization, on the other hand, compels to engage the space, corporality, and epistemology of flesh and forms by thinking through the multiplicities of embodiment as experienced through art and social productions. Margolles opens possibilities for us to think about fugitive moments of material, subjectivity, and social entanglements within institutionalized alienation itself that are otherwise re-metabolized by white innocence and the global art space.

Key Words: Aesthetics; Affect; Flesh; Pornotrope; White Innocence; Witnessing.

Introduction

In 2017, the artist Hannah Black launched a campaign demanding the Whitney Biennial curators to remove Dana Schutz’s painting “Open Casket” from the show, and calling for its removal. In her open letter, which was subsequently co-signed by several dozen artists of color, Black states, “White shame “is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist.... stop treating black pain as material.”” Open Casket is based on a photograph of the funeral of Emmett Till, a fourteen- year old black boy brutally lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Against the backdrop of activism and demonstrations against structural, anti-black police brutality

in the United States, black American artist, Parker Bright, initiated a small-scale, yet powerful, protest, standing in front of Schutz's painting for hours. Bright, a black-American artist, intentionally obstructed view of *Open Casket*, wearing a T-shirts that read "Black Death Spectacle" and "No Lynch Mob." (Basciano, 2017)

The lines on Bright's shirt make the connection between structural and, indeed, epistemic anti-black racism, the present and history of white supremacy, and the mechanisms of spectacle and spectatorship. Both *Black* and Bright specifically tell us how the privileges of whiteness are disavowed by the spectacle of their own [white] shame and "white innocence."

When we discuss white innocence, we certainly understand it as it was initially used by American legal scholar, Thomas Ross. Ross argues forcefully that white people in the United States are never considered guilty by merit of their skin (ie they are always assumed innocent in a court of law and society in general) (1990; 2-3). At the same time, the reality of black people is always abstract, preventing them from access to fundamental rights of humanity in 19th century United States. The "power of black abstraction," as a rhetorical tool, "obscures the humanness of black persons," removing them from "real and rich social context" and reduces them to racial tropes. (6) Yet, more over, we think about white innocence in the context of coloniality and race hierchies defined by the social-historical-material-epistemological assemblage of the coloniality of whiteness. For this reason, we rely on the work of Gloria Wekker for the concept of "white innocence." (Wekker, 2016)

In no uncertain terms, Bright and *Black* reveal how "white innocence" structures aesthetic interventions as a secular and moral means of witnessing "black pain," a means by which these interventions attempt to function as auto-politicization and political action. In her study of the paradoxical relationship between force and

denial of racialized aggression (at its intersection with gender, sexuality and class), Wekker puts forward the concept of white innocence whereby she describes both force and denial within a binding structure of affect and a reservoir of accumulated knowledge. Together they inform an instrumental and enabling blind spot, “which barely hides a structure of superiority toward people of colour.” She tracks how, in the Netherlands, “persistently, an innocent, fragile, emancipated white Dutch self is constructed versus a guilty, uncivilized, barbaric other.” (15). In her mapping of the “house that race built,” borrowing from Wahneema Lubiano (1998), she names processes of white, the ways in which, for example, “forgetting, glossing over, supposed color blindness” function as means to maintain “an inherent and natural superiority vis-à-vis people of color.” (15) In our view, the forms of “forgetting, glossing over, supposed color blindness” serve as central psycho-social defense of white innocence, namely disavowal. In the case of *Open Casket*, white innocence disavows the aestheticization of black suffering results in a pernicious reproduction of racial violence but also the reproduction of white supremacy (i.e. the Self-Same of Humanity).

Black and Bright call out thus for us the recuperative function within ontologies and subjectivities structured (and white supremacy) where the image of the suffering-Other does not break free from the meaning that informs it, the historical conditions that produce it, or from the affect that supports it. Instead, the image remains caught within a Manichean subject/object relationship constituted by a curative relation of mastery and servitude, or perhaps better, being and non-being, that is inextricably contained with and by the ontology of whiteness. The Other, in this context, becomes a “sentient-object” only when needed to fill in the space of “lacking-object- of desire.” If this Lacanian-Hegelian onto-subjective process may

seem in-built to the perennial interplay between the Self-Same and Other, thinkers from Fanon to Sylvia Wynter show how this process is universalized within a recursive hierarchy of race. Rather than destabilizing the self and its mastery, the image only reinforces the existing relation of racial domination, a domination of “humanity” structured around the ontology of whiteness.

Frank Wilderson draws this ideological slight of (the white) hand when he speaks of the submerged racialized narratives entwined with the filmic image, connecting with abject non-being of Blackness. “The narrative strategies of films that articulate the suffering of the worker,” he states, “are shot through with obstinate refusals to surrender their cinematic embrace to the structure of the Slave’s domination, something infinitely more severe than exploitation and alienation.” (Wilderson, 2010, p.7) He continues that “if, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a labourer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity.” (Ibid, p.9)

From Kant and Hegel to Benjamin, Heidegger, and Adorno, the European, theoretical imagination has mapped the connection between ontology and aesthetics. More recently, Rancière optimistically claims that the aesthetic experience produces a form of rupture, shaping a new “body and sensorium. It triggers,” he says, “new passions, which means new forms of balance – or imbalance – between an occupation and the sensory equipment appropriate to it.” Rancière’s thought explicitly places the “aesthetic experience” within “a political effect,” where “the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations [...] it is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between the bodies, the world they live in, and the way in which they are ‘equipped’

to adapt to it. [...] It allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation” (Ranciere, 2009, p. 72).

Ranciere’s contribution is noteworthy because he centers aesthetic experience within “a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible.” (Ibid, p. 72)

Yet, reading Rancière alongside various Black-American authors (Weheliyah (2014), Spillers (1987) , Hartman (1997) , Moten (2018) and Wilderson (2010), makes us question Ranciere’s casual reference to “common experience” that undergirds the theorization of his axiomatic “aesthetic experience.” Such critiques the white, Western, male-centered homology of “humanity” have been incisively offered to us by theorist of “Black pessimism” and decoloniality, who themselves build on the Black and anti-colonial thought.

The problem that this paper addresses then is the complex (and pernicious) embroilment of white innocence’s epistemology and ontology, in its constitutive pornotroping where desire is at the very heart of it, and aesthetics and affect are mobilized in its materialization. In our view, as long as the subject/object master/slave dynamic remains untouched, witnessing, it seems, will remain within the horizon of the spectacle and the aesthetic experience another instance of the iteration of domination.

Our article is, perhaps, less an exploration and more of a mapping of the epistemological, affective and aesthetic dimensions of a particular form of desire; that is, a desire to transcend the matrix of race-power through a field of representation that seemingly represents it. Undergirding this cartography, we contemplate the complexities of ‘race’ and desire through aesthetic rhizomes specifically as ourselves theorists of color (Latina and Arab, living and working in Anglo-American

institutions). What the interventions of *Bright and Black*, couched within a deep tradition of critical black thought, offers us is an invitation to think about the possibilities of affective-aesthetic matrix differently as theorists of color? With this in mind, we ponder what may be the productive forces that arise from the struggles of embodied experience that is exclusively articulated through the double-consciousness of being racialized against the simultaneous desire of whiteness to disavow racial structures that construct that very desire.

Desire and pornotroping: affective impasses

In her *Sensual Excess, Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018), Amber Jamilla Musser embarks on a critique and an invitation. Her critique adroitly identifies how experience and desire for witnessing remain embroiled within “pornotroping enfleshment” (Musser, 2018, p. 7). These terms, pornotrope and enfleshment are coined by Hortese Spillers, who in thinking about the status of black male and female bodies in the context of transatlantic slave trade argues that (1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality, (2) at the same time –in stunning contradiction- the captive body is reduced to a thing, becoming a being for the captor; (3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of otherness; (4) as a category of “otherness”, the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness (Spillers, 2003, p. 206).

As Musser explains, pornotroping refers to the process of objectification that “violently reduces people into commodities while simultaneously rendering them sexually available” (Musser, 2018, p. 6). The similarities of this concept to the

Lacan's notion of fantasy as well as Žižek's expounding on it, are remarkable. Yet, also, if the work of Spillers and Wynter tells us anything, it is how equally remarkable is the absence of any awareness or reflection around racialized notions of corporality itself within their theory. As theorists of color, we believe that this is not coincidental.

With this racial "oversight" in mind, we perceive the value of Spiller's insights into how pornotroping entails being reduced to flesh; that is, to the "zero degree of social conceptualization." (Spillers, 206) In turn, enfleshment refers to the process of depersonalization and pure objectification, thereby ensuring a removal of black bodies from subjectivity in an unparalleled way within Western metaphysics, psychic formation, and sociability. Here, as in the case of phantasy,/fantasy, sexuality and gender play a particular role in the racialization of Others, resulting from a projection and identification with the mastery of a racialized-qua-universalized [white] Self. Indeed, as the liberal unconscious of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*, the identifications that makes abject black-bodies is more than a pivotal white supremacist tactic of domination but one that comes in the form of seductive aesthetics that hails us to collaborate with its ontological and epistemic logics. Following Alexander Weheliye, therefore, Musser argues that the violence and projection require at their core "a subject who desires and who thereby objectifies and possesses others through this desire" (Musser, 2018, p. 7).

We are therefore identifying the structural femicidal-racist violence of pornotroping at play *within the liberal desire for repair and "acknowledgement."* This desirous compulsion seeks to assuage the lack at the heart of the Self-Same that naturalizes feminized-racial violence. Desire for acknowledgement is one more extractive desire, claiming "black suffering" in forms of "witnessing," which

operates as a narcissistic, self-effacing disavowal of the impossibility of difference that is produced through the very desire of the Other itself. The flesh of the pornotroped black suffering body is recycled in order for it to be re-presented as “material” for Black pain, to affirm Hanna Black, that is appears separate from the very dynamics that allow such an ethical-aesthetic process to occur. The pornotrope of white innocence, in Musser’s works is to “acknowledge that some people circulate as highly charged affective objects, while simultaneously being positioned outside of the parameters of normative sexuality and subjectivity” (Musser, 2018, p. 9).

The concept of the pornotrope, therefore, describes the social relations of domination and the psychic circuit of desire that characterizes racialization whereby nonwhite populations are/were racialized such that gender and sexual transgressions are/were “not incidental” (Ibid., p. 8) to the production of nonwhite labor, but constitutive of it. This circuit of desire emerges from the lack that of universalized Self-Same’s desire for the racialized [suffering] Other, whose “pain” is therein disavowed through an aestheticized objectification of it. The aestheticized affective of shame and “self-consciousness” is, in fact, the magical undoing of racial ontology. The work of Christina Sharpe is relevant as she examines the complex nature of mobilized identification with the pain of the other and argues “(...) the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness of black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet, if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double edged for in making the other’s suffering one’s own the suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration”. (...) “what concerns me here”, she continues,

“is the spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle” (Sharpe, p.19-21)

Within the same structures that produce the pornotrope through antagonistic narratives of loss and the possibility of recovering fullness, fantasy provides a libidinal framework for othering; as studies have shown, fantasy borders the experience of jealousy, desire and hatred (Genogroup, 2008; Jason Glynos and Yanis Stravakakis, 2008; Palacios, 2009, 2013; Weisband, 2018). It could be argued that fantasy structures white innocence and liberal racial disavowal not unlike its function within violent white supremacist structures that organize black and brown bodies as “material” for use, labor, and abjection. Although with different conceptual/ political points of departure, liberal fantasy for repair and witness—a desire that is constitutive of white innocence—are a form of pornotroping that historicizes current social-libidinal relations that inform Otherness necessary to prevent the disruption of white ontology.

This condition, as according to this framework, where there can be no alternative to the phallic cut that inaugurates the detours of desire framed by fantasy.

This process, we argue, is not abstract or immaterial. Bright and Black specifically call attention to its materiality. The process of disavowal as enabled by white innocence is a material process within the coloniality of whiteness. Like Wekker, Sheehi has shown the mechanical, psychological processes within processes of Israeli settler-colonialism. (2018) In examining the “good will” dialogue projects of well-meaning left-leaning Zionist and Western psychologists intend to establish humanizing dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, Sheehi observes the violence of “witnessing” pain and suffering when detached from on-going structures of settler-colonialism and occupation. These dialogue initiatives are enframed by the same

colonial, white innocence as discussed by Wekker's Dutch racial structures. But, more insidiously, the fantasy of dialogues reconstitutes disavowed Zionism as a colonial settler ideology and practice; it normalizes the Israeli occupation regime and closure system as normal; and it configures the subjective desire of the Palestinians as a pathology. Like Bright's and Black's intervention, however, refusal of dialogue functions as a refusal of innocence and self-objectification, acting, in fact, as a performance of self-affirmation. Therefore, the role of fantasy/phantasy of coloniality and whiteness relies on the "ontology" of a universalized [colonial] self that transcends its own structural [colonial] violence, a violence necessary for its own preeminence.

Refusing Singularization and the limits of "Jouissance"

What we aim then is to map desire's productive as well as reproductive capacity to both recuperate and challenge the limits of an ontology of selfhood ("humanity") structured on domination and exclusion through the simultaneous seductions and potentialities an affective-aesthetic approach that stresses not only a self-awareness of desire and disavowal but also a necessity for the destruction of the feminized-racialized ontology of the Self-Same.

This Lacanian framework for the sociability of desire has also been successfully mobilized by authors such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that the theorizing of this structural splitting between the alleged distance between social and self within subjectivity is equivalent to the ontological dimension of the social, characterized by the same intrinsic and unavoidable void, not only between being and its representation, but a void in being.¹ In Laclau's words, "It is the very lack within the structure that is at the origin of the structure. This means that

we not only have subject positions within the structure, but also the subject as an attempt to fill these structural gaps.” (Laclau, 2000, p. 58). As argued elsewhere (Palacios 2020), the fate of the individual and the social seem then to be marked by this permanent [failed] attempt at articulating forms of totality – or in Laclau’s words, “hegemonic articulations” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 93)– where the particular “claims” to represent the universal. What is lacking (*manquant/e*) becomes repressed and covered by transcendental narratives about the self and threatening others; whereas (lost) enjoyment, linked to the experience of plenitude, is mobilized again and again as expressions of antagonism according to libidinal economies informed by the logic of what Lacan theorizes as “object a.” What seems absent to us often in this theorization of the self-social nexus that produces and is produce by desire is how the “other” operates as a space for the anxious certainty of a the “universalized,” totalized Self-Same, the unconscious Vitruvian man who operates as the ideal-ego of the racial “ethnaclass” of whiteness-qua-Humanity, as Sylvia Wynter would say. (Wynter, 2003)

Let us return to Black’s and Bright’s interventions. We understand, at their core, these two offer a refusal. The refusal is not only the withholding of permission to accept an aestheticized act of white innocence or a refusal to accept the gesture of self-flagellating ablution of white guilty through art. Rather, they refuse to accept the desire of the [white] Self-Same. It is a refusal to be the cathected object of the *desire* for white redemption, collaboration, and recuperative forgiveness. Their interventions are a rejection of being reconstituted, yet once more, as an object of desire in order to give coherence and futurity of the “we.”

What we are arguing is that white innocence operates within an epistemological and ontological framework where desire of the Self-Same is the

binding glue to “coloniality of power” that structures aestheticized engagements with the matrix of race-gender-sexuality-capitalism. The desire for “humanity’s” repair (ie white repair) emerges from the crease where the Other inhabits and exists alone then as an object of violence and then repair. In our view, this is perpetuated through particular types of knowledge-power based in the affirmation, production and reinforcement of the dichotomy subject/object; order/chaos; meaning/psychosis; activity/passivity; rationality/affect. In other words, desire coheres the project of totality. As argued extensively elsewhere, key sociological and psychoanalytic concepts have been complicit in the theorizing of feminized -racialized alterity and multiplicity as threatening to totality, thereby enforcing an epistemology based on subject/object dualisms (Butler, 2006; Chritchley 1998; Palacios, 2004, 2019, 2020; Palacios & Plot 2020).

In this sense, we see interventions such as Schutz’s as locked within the limits of linguistic representation and the repressive limits of the symbolic order (the Law) that defines the subject as “lacking,” a lack that can only be filled by a racialized-sexualized-gendered object. Yet also, this symbolic order regulates ways in which Black, Indigenous, and people of color scholars and artists may offer acts of resistance to this order itself. In these above mentioned parallel paradigms that aim at totality and singularization, exclusion of feminine-racialized threat (Palacios, 2020) appears as the precondition for the emergence of subjectivity and meaning (or perhaps, paraphrasing Wilderson, “the emergence of humanity”), as the search for the lost “object” of desire (to counteract anxiety and melancholia) inevitably informs exclusionary and antagonistic fantasies of plenitude. Such affective-aesthetic framework is deeply imbricated in the reproduction of violence, and the voyeurism

and spectacle that accompanies its representation and attempts at “witnessing” as a form of racial contrition without reparation and restructure.

Flesh/ing out the Space of Desire

Not coincidentally, a Laclauian reading of white innocence is plausible and rather easy to articulate but, in doing so, we would continue to be complicit within the racial solipsism that undergirds his critical formulation of the impossibility of coherence of the universalized totality of the self-social matrix. The “other” that produces desire, even within the formulation of Laclau, and Lacan for that matter, functions as a universalizing space of racial erasure, where colonized, the radicalized, feminized, and sexualize subjects-qua-objects, are homogenized by the anxiety of the Self-Same in order to be operationalized as the impetus for desire, sociability, and their own antithesis (i.e. violence, threat, castration). In other words, from our perspective, the modalities of desire and sociability as theorized by Laclau, for example, remain insufficient, and ultimately violent. With this in mind, we mark that the “fate” of totality as theorized within studies of hegemony (i.e., the very existence of society requires a hegemonic articulation) is always inevitably racist and colonial constitution of the social “we.”

Instead, we seek to pursue Fred Moten’s adjuration, following Edouard Glissant, to “consent to not being a single being.” (Moten, 2018) In fact, our premise is precisely in conversations with the tradition that Moten, Spillers, and others have begun. That is, as non-black, racialized subjects of the Global South with diverse modalities enframed by the same epistemology of coloniality, our critique of white innocence provides the parameter to probes the violence, limitations, and promises of the “we”-- as subjects of “flesh” with embodied and embedded experiences.

Ultimately irreducible to singularity, we understand the onto-political ploy at the heart of any invitation to separate aesthetic and affective experiences from the sociability of libidinal dynamics that inform the relation with ourselves and the Other (human and non-human). Understanding the epistemological and social space from which Spiller's theory of flesh emerges, we are keenly cautious of the seductions of instrumentalizing the theory of pornotroping for transnational racial critiques of coloniality.

White innocence then calls us to think about race, desire, and subjectivity. Not only within the context of a "master" (and Master's) narrative of [white] universalized selfhood, but it also hails us to think about the fissure and fault lines that are present within the coloniality of racial hierarchy -as it is defined by abjection of blackness and universality of whiteness as constituent poles of the spectrum. In other words, locating the ideological function of white innocence, within its habitus of universal humanity, permits us also to consider how the flesh itself that is constituent of the "we" is not ideologically and socially same throughout this heterogeneity of the third-person collective—although Laclau and Lacan might invite us into the trap of thinking it so. Therefore, we ask the principle social question that white innocence and the naturalized violence of racial supremacy elicits; namely, whether there is a "we" that claims promise and potentiality in the heterogeneity of the "we" while ontologically regulated by the Same, colonizing master's I?

In order to maintain its own coherence as well phantasies of its own transcendence, Sameness requires and produces desire because it is a Sameness that writes universal subjective-qua-white desire through invitation, hailing, seduction, coercion, and domination of brown and black bodies that, in turn, constitute the desiring "we." At the same time, this leaves us at the *huis clos* of brown and black

ontology, left exterior to universal “humanity” that ponders its own impossibility through the lack that is the habitus for brown and black ontology and the Otherness, which they inhabit as constitutive, supplemental objects of desire.

Symbolic Destitution? Teresa Margolles’s Vaporization



Image: *Vaporization*. 2002. Installation view in ‘Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values’ at MoMA PS1.

Let us then consider a radically different intervention, that drastically leans away from an aesthetics of hailing and identification mobilized by a voyeuristic gaze of an innocent viewer. While we recognize the contextual, historical and political differences in this production with “Open Casket” and the counter-interventions that make it noteworthy, we approach *Vaporización/Vaporization* (2002), a well-known installation by Mexican visual artist Teresa Margolles, relationally through an association of how art and aestheticized political interventions operate within a matrix of transnational, racialized, aestheticized *institutional* space.

Vaporización un-makes particular forms of subjectivity and experience of domination and refuses to re-consecrate the structural constitution of a universalized (innocent white) identity as performed through the international art scene in the metropolitic art space. If Schutz's "Open Casket" operates along certain epistemological closure that reconstitutes the subject/object dualism of "I can see/dominate you," it is, Black and Bright alert us, precisely because the "I" of shame and guilt is the same "I" within a "we" that can never be Black. Rather, Margolles's installation makes impossible for this self-referential closure to take place. Her installation engineers an *experience*, where one wanders through a barely lit gallery, which is filled with a foggy mist. That mist was created from the disinfected water used to wash corpses in the city morgue of Distrito Federal, Mexico, where she once worked as forensic pathologist. She, in this sense, leaves behind in this installation any attempt at representing violence, and with it, one could also argue, any framework of totality and lack that mobilizes voyeuristic (phallic) enjoyment from which the Other is otherwise precluded.

Exhibited at MOMA PS1 in 2002, Amy Sara Carrol argues cogently that reading *Vaporización* should not be decontextualized within a formalistic and aesthetic reading of the embodiment of globalized art production but rather needs to be located squarely within a socio-political, aesthetic contexts of post-NAFTA Mexican art production, the Mexican state's attempts to dismantle drug cartels. (Carrol, 2017, 131) Margolles's work certainly operates from within the locality and heterogeneity of a particular political and corporal context. For us, we are concerned about the ways in which art commutes between particular contexts that are structured by global capital and epistemologies of "witnessing." The "levelling effect" of the international art space then begs us to consider the longevity of Margolles's

installation that toured for more than a decade after its debut. Understanding Margolles's work as an instantiation, in fact, of her participation within a Mexican artistic collective in the 1990s allows us also think about how "the life of the corpse" (Carrol, 132) anchors the notion of "flesh" as it simultaneously commutes between times, contexts, and localities, thereby, allowing for new experimental (dis)encounters to take place.

The installation encourages us to think of a conception of aesthetics where matter—including quite literally, in this case, brown flesh-- becomes a political agent (Bennett, 2010; Benso, 2000; Heidegger, 1962, 1993a, 2001; Keenan & Weizman, 2012, Palacios 2018). The mist of vaporization itself, far from being a passive receptor of a voyeuristic gaze, becomes active in the interaction, framing, interruption and even contradiction of that subjective experience that fails to grasp/ingest it. A poignant description of this work stresses for example, the "tension that Teresa Margolles creates between what is visible and what is invisible, between what is pure and what is contaminated and corrupted, between power and marginality and between life and death." (Coletta, 2018) More strikingly, Imogen Bakelmun refers to the irony of *Vaporization*, stating "Vaporization thus articulates itself in this material semiotic of disinfection, purification and eradication. Indeed, not only was the materiality of the bodies symbolically abstracted through water but the water itself was then vaporised, pumped into the gallery in a hazy mist." (Bakelmun, 2015, 2). In her view, the vaporized water was a gesture towards the tropes of incorporeality and ghostliness. However, the materiality of the mist contributed to her feeling of being "contaminated, compromised, invaded by the bodily particles of the dead." (Ibid, p. 2)

Yet, what is interesting in both of these commentators commentary is, not only the absence of race and the "foreignness" of the (dead) Mexican, atomize

subjects but also the impossibility that these radical subjects, while ingested still cannot be metabolized by their American audience. This raises the question then whether we can speak of certain experience of symbolic destitution outside a matrix of imperial, colonial and racial power as enacted in the global metropole?

In the context of the study of political violence in Chile, Palacios (2019) argued that memorialization seem to be always displaced and challenged, not only by the politics of forgetting but also by a space of silence – absence – which is left when the naming of violence happens. It is this spacing, this interruption of knowledge and certainty, she argued, what conveys “an experience characterized by a paradoxical undecidability between the truth of the real, and the lack of certainty and even knowledge to represent it”. While discussing the affective force of Monumento Rieles², and more particularly of the nacre button attached to the train rail –an object that only insinuates its presence but that resists to be grasped by the gaze that attempts to possess it, Palacios argued that the button “in its humble literality, manages to destabilize symbolic closure (digestion) through its evasiveness, and in doing so prevents the reaffirmation of a type of ‘subjective omnipotence’ while resisting the colonizing operation of the gaze that wants to capture, frame and own it”. Instead, she continues, “this semi-invisible but material, tiny nacre-ruin offers back a truth without knowledge, a gap, a question, a silence. Its opacity consists in its resistance to becoming an epistemological object while at the same time it powerfully destabilizes the subject who encounters it”. (Palacios, 2019, p. 614).

With this in mind, Vaporization could be read not only against Schutz’s “Open Casket” but alongside Black’s and Bright’s political and artistic interventions. This reading of Margolles with Black and Bright aligns with Moten’s call (to refuse to be a single being), as it mobilizes an experience of “excess” that does not refer or result

from “lack” but one that favours an undoing of the epistemological matrix of white supremacy and its affective and aesthetic defense, namely white innocence. Reaching to Moten is not a capricious act of solidarity. He himself offers this connection in *Stolen Life* (2018). While scrutinizing Kant, Fred Moten offers an account of this excess explicitly as it is expressed in black art. “Black art,” he says, “stages [excess], performs it, by way of things breaking and entering and exiting the exclusionary frame of the putatively ennobling, quickening representations to which they are submitted, paradoxically, as the very enfleshment of the un- or sub representable; by way of parts improperly rupturing the w/holes to which they will have never belonged or never have been fully relegated but by which they have been enveloped.” (Ibid, p. 17) Moten is referring precisely the subjective-epistemological juggernaut to which we previously referred, but offers an understanding of black and, in the case of Margolles, brown art as emerging from an ontological space of fullness that goes either invisible or is denigrated because it inhabits the space of the Other, the lack that prohibits the universalized Self-Same to contain it.

Interestingly, the mist of Vaporization compels us to rethink the concept of flesh and forms of sensual epistemology in a number of different ways. How do we, within the context of brown subjects of coloniality, discuss, represent, and analytically approach “flesh” within the mainframe of the racial hierarchy of universal “humanity” as ordained by white supremacist monopoly of “being” without simultaneously erasing the particularities of blackness as a master signifier of abjection? Relatedly, how does the experience of contamination, address and depart from what has been erased by epistemologies and phantasies of totality that serve the double purpose to exonerate the guilty from continued systemic violence and erase the “other” into the Sameness of the universal? In other words, how does

Margolles' piece move us beyond a universalized racialized epistemology of subjectivity without discounting the multiplicities of embodiment that escape dominant modalities of presentation and visibility.

Excess of Aestheticize Witnessing

What connects, for us, the "Open Casket" event with Margolles's installation are the ways in which both are mediated through a subjective visibility of witnessing, which is based upon an epistemology of universalized humanity that precisely operates the erasure of the subjective lack in which people of color are segregated and from which they emerge as both objects of desire and violence. Yet, at the same time, an excess of corporality (or excessive phantasy emerging from the phallic anxiety of the [white] Self-Same) gives light to the ontology of black and brown people obfuscated by the "innocent" act of witnessing in the metropole.

For Spillers, the notion of the flesh emphasizes the limits and faults of notions of "visual truth" that poses the black body within the frame of the spectacle to be consumed by white gaze. What fascinates us is how this dynamic uncannily crystallizes in the art space, that aestheticizes suffering and the being of the Other(s). Musser's work helps us "flesh out" the productive tension that results by identifying the hegemony of visual truths and the material and ontological experiences that escape it. The notion of "escape" is not inconsequential as it resonates with Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten's "fugitive planning and black study" that are "about reaching out to find connection; they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being" (Harvey and Moten, 2013; 5).

Musser observes that flesh operates within opacity and illegibility, as forms of resistance. In her words, "This knowledge –what I call epistemologies of fleshiness-

in order to insist on naming fleshiness as a space where ontology and epistemology come together - consists of selfhoods, intimacies, and interactions that are arranged multiply” (Musser, 2018, p. 10). Theory and *knowledge*, in this case, emerge from flesh and are enacted by bodies; thought is thus through the body and its movements. Such propositions elicit a dialogue with the work of LaMonda Horton-Stallings. Horton-Stalling presents us with a rich, affective reading of concept of “funk.” She discusses funk not only a musical genre but as a modality of black experience, expression, and being linked to histories of blackness that connect body to labor to history (in North America and Africa) to corporality. “Funk,” she states, “produces alternate orders of knowledge about the body and imagination that originate in a sensorium predating empire of knowledge.” (Horton-Stallings, 2015, p. 6) Evocating an analytic to which we can think about Margolles’s vapor, funk surpasses the limits of subject/object dualisms and moving into what could be called an erotic epistemology or an epistemology of the sensual. It is within this framework that Musser suggests we think in terms of “brown jouissance,” which itself arise from her thinking through the excess of bodily or sensual experience.

According to Musser, “black women are posited as the fleshy limit of theory” (Musser, p. 9). Brown jouissance “gives us ways to think about the possibilities of re-signifying that affective fleshiness, by showing us that which is not encumbered by discourses of sexuality, but that which traffics in sensuality, that amorphous quality of fleshiness that Spillers argues was assigned to the “captive body”” (Ibid, p. 9). Brown Jouissance emphasizes the production of selfhood in relation to the social where Thing, Other and Object converge to form selfhood. If the Other is produced and determined from the outside-- perhaps through the space of the lack within the universal self-- through objectification, racialization, feminization, as Denise Ferreira

da Silva argues, the Other occupies a space of projection and opacity. What Musser is conveying is that, beyond the constraining and objectifying operation of the pornotrope, there is a flesh that is not tamed by and exceeds oppression.

Although this is all very promising -a multiple flesh that exceeds the field of discursivity- it is important to note that Musser finds in Lacan and his notion of *jouissance*, inspiration to account for excess. In her reading, *jouissance* can be understood as “excess sensation.” As she rightly argues, “*jouissance*, especially phallic *jouissance*, is understood as something that, however, inadvertently, reifies the idea of sovereign subjectivity through an insistence on dwelling in this space of shattering, thereby emphasizing the dichotomy between subject and Thing” (Musser, p. 13). If, for Lacan, *jouissance* is on the side of the “thing,” in her reading, brown *jouissance* occurs between Thing, Other and Object, not taking place within the realm of subjectivity but in the “murkiness of flesh, self and sense.” She continues to say that “if brown *jouissance* is a reveling in fleshiness and its attendant web of meanings and possibilities, it brings us very directly to consider the opacity of the self and the set of relationalities and sensualities that emerges from there.” (p. 14).

This is a provocative and productive reading of *jouissance*. However, we think it is worth being cautious around a Lacanian framework that ultimately, as argued above, may foster the longevity of a dichotomizing of subject/object that calls for the containment of excess. However, Musser’s framework of black *jouissance* is invaluablely productive for us especially when we relocate it in the instance of the “Open Casket” event. Black’s and Bright’s interventions burst the placid space of innocent white witnessing that disavows the violence not of a racial history but of a racial epistemology of aetheticization and witnessing itself. Understanding the subject/object dichotomy as relational, as Musser surely would agree, allows us to

understand the dynamic nature of subject formations within agile hegemonic ontological *structures* that bring together artistic expression, structural and spatial performance and witnessing that were disrupted by, literally, the body of the artist Parker Bright and the uncompromising analytic of artist Hannah Black. These interventions speak to Margolle's own refusal to allow such passive, "innocent" witnessing that facilitates the displacement of the unmetabolizable black and brown body.

Against then the backdrop of the imperialism of particular subject formations (e.g. the imperialism of the Oedipal Family) and therefore the coloniality of modes offer for subjectivity expression and desire, Musser also allows us to consider how the plentitude of a brown jouissance—as a mode of thinking through desire in a number of racialized, transnational contexts--emerges from the space of the Other as a habitus for brown and black ontology that itself betrays the universality and hegemony of a totalizing system.

Concluding Remarks

Hortense Spillers critique of the process of "enfleshment"- the dehumanizing process that characterizes objectification and abjection of black bodies during slave trade and beyond- is powerfully relevant to understanding the ways in which blackness is definitive of being for the colonial world itself. The concept of the flesh, or the "epistemology of fleshiness" in Musser's words (Musser, 11), provides us with, in Spillers words, a "primary narrative" to think through the "excess" of the flesh of "others" that activates white innocence (Spillers, 1987; 67). Without detracting from the ethical imperative in acknowledging that theories of flesh are squarely rooted and emerge from a history and current reality of white supremacy that defines a global

racial hierarchy upon which universal humanity is built (and, post-World War Two, erases), the concept of the flesh also offers the realm of multiplicity for those of us thinking through the relationality between lasting coloniality and embodiment in the Global South. As the flesh escapes the traditional dualistic epistemological distinctions -where elements are perceived in their “separateness”- we are encouraged to think of dynamic assemblages, networks, of visible and invisible elements, human and not human, interacting and affecting each other. In this sense, we argued, the flesh offers a radical ethical notion of relationality from which the unevenness of power that surfaces so clearly to visibility in performances of white innocence and witnessing.

It is interesting to observe the significant points of convergence between the notion of the flesh and some promising accounts on feminist science and technology studies and new materialities and queer affect that cut across critical race and decolonial studies. All of them—even considering their varying emphasis and scale within the dynamic and fluid intersectional matrix of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class--stress the irreducibility of heterogeneity and the relational and generative force of the thingly-being-with (Barad, 2007; Muñoz, 1997; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015; Moten, 2018; Musser, 2018). Arguing against theories that grant absolute hegemonic power to capitalism order and being, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) follows the “life” of the matsutake mushroom that grows in Japan and Oregon in order to allow us to consider a particular onto-political practice, namely what she calls “the art of noticing.” This praxis marks unintentional, symbiotic, and ecological world-making collaborate and conjoin into overlapping assemblages in the “latent commons,” a social and ecological space that defies capitalist objectification and commodification of labor, land, and life (255). The

description of latent commons presents us with a radical possibility of the transformation of the art space as experience in Margolles's *Vaporization*, where fugitive moments of entanglements in the mist open up possibilities within institutionalized alienation and violence that are otherwise re-metabolized by white innocence.

It is from this relational ethos that we would like to (re)think the affective aesthetic matrix of witnessing that deflects from the ontological and epistemological violence that it belies. White innocence is the phallic cut that opens the gap for us to envisage different forms and possibilities of desire may be imagined, excavated, identified and even remembered once we situate ourselves outside of phallic jouissance of the master logos of the Self-Same, the white Vitruvean Man of Humanity. The body of Parker Bright that refuses the jouissance of white desire and shorts the circuit of exculpatory white innocence is the gash that reveals the abode of the racialized Other—in space of the master('s) phallogocentric lack—from which the plurality and liberatory jouissance of flesh emerges and abides. The limits, indeed violence and complicity, of thinking of witnessing within the context of racial anxiety are also made apparent by the powerful, disruptive intervention of Black and Bright. The critique offered in this article hopes to alleviate them from the imperative that necessitates this disruption of structure, systemic violence.

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² Consisting of a cubic metal structure built to exhibit the remains of train lines found at the bottom of the sea in the Quintero Region, during the 2004 Human Rights investigation. As reported by the Inter American Commission of Human Rights (<http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Chile77eng/chap.2.htm>), the 1st of September of 1976 the recovery of the corpse of a woman (later identified by her family as Marta Ugarte), in the sea town Los Molles, made possible for the Chilean public to learn about the tactic known as ‘death flights’, whereby the military using helicopters, would throw hundred of bodies of victims of political violence; bodies would be tied to train rails so they would never be found. One of the rails exhibited in Monumento Rieles in Villa Grimaldi has a nacre button attached to it. Images of Monumento Rieles Images can be found on the Villa Grimaldi museum website: <http://villagrimaldi.cl/parque-por-la-paz/monumento-rieles-2/>, accessed November 21st. 2019. Patricio Guzmán’s film “The Pearl Button” (2015) offers an interesting mediation of the nacre button and its link to other forms of structural violence in Chile.