

Cutting into Colonial Visual Regimes:

Form, Ethics, Opacity,
and the Collages of Frida Orupabo

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1.0 Introduction

On the gallery wall, Frida Orupabo's (b. 1986) life-sized, human paper-dolls do not appear docile. They stare back, possessing a force and presence that call upon the viewer to reflect on their positionality. The experience will, of course, differ depending on one's background, and on whether one has a relation to the colonial archives from which Orupabo sources much of her photographic material. Regardless, standing in proximity to the collage, we are not permitted to maintain a neutral distance from the work, nor are we afforded the pleasure of self-forgetting. Instead, we find ourselves drawn into an unwilling partaking in a relation that unsettles our position, rendering palpable both the vantage point from which we look and the feeling of being looked at and exposed. In this sense, the works open onto, or perhaps demand, a reckoning with not only with what we are looking at, but with how we look and from where.

An awareness of the act of looking was central to an interview Orupabo gave in connection with her exhibition at the Stevenson gallery in South Africa in 2020. In the interview, Orupabo described her practice as responding to the feeling of being "determined, given an identity that I don't understand or agree with," and said that she seeks to make the viewer self-aware and question their own gaze — "what it is they see and why; to make them more aware about themselves than the work."¹ Orupabo's reflections open onto concerns that have been taken up within broader critical discourse on positionality, responsibility, and the ethics of looking. In *Yearning*, bell hooks, an American professor, author, and cultural critic, observes how many "scholars, critics, and writers preface their work by stating that they are 'white' as though the mere acknowledgment of this fact were sufficient, as though it [conveys] all we need to know of standpoint, motivation, [and] direction." Criticizing the tendency of theorists to limit their analysis to the racial Other, hooks challenges scholars to integrate an interrogation not only of their positionality, but of the conditions under which their perspectives are formed.² In this way, she argues "the interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fundamentally fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than denial."³

¹ Frida Orupabo, "The Beginning Is Always the Body," interview by Elvira Dyangani Ose, October 9, 2020, 8–9, Exhibition catalogue, <https://www.stevenson.info>.

² "Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 2nd ed., by bell hooks (Routledge, 2015).

³ "Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism," 55.

While hooks insists on the importance of positionality, she further maintains that critique must move *beyond* declarative self-location to attend to the “epistemological shifts” through which perspectives are formed and transformed. Understanding how such epistemological reorientations occur, hooks suggests is essential to enabling collective movement in “new and oppositional directions.”⁴ Following bell hooks, this dissertation attends to how perspectives as formed, sustained, and transformed through acts of looking. Such an understanding is especially pertinent when approaching works that engage with the historic entanglement of vision with regimes of domination and epistemic control.

Bell hooks’ emphasis on epistemological vigilance brings questions of responsibility and positionality into focus as ongoing practical concerns that inform how images and artworks shaped by, or responding to, colonial histories of looking are approached and encountered. These concerns are central to my engagement with Frida Orupabo’s work, which I approach through a framework informed by French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas’ thinking on responsibility and sensibility, and Martinican theorist and writer Édouard Glissant’s notion of opacity. This framework, in turn, challenges modes of relationality shaped by colonial visual regimes of representation. Glissant’s notion of opacity — as the right not to be reduced to clarity, recognition, or legibility — unsettles dominant Western epistemic assumptions that relation must be grounded in comprehension.⁵ Within this framework, the question becomes how these works might be approached attentive to the reproduction of colonial hierarchies, particularly those sustained through demands for transparency, legibility, identification, and epistemic mastery. Rather than seeking to recover or stabilize meaning, the project is concerned with how an ethical mode of engagement might be sustained in proximity to images and artworks that are shaped by, or respond to, these histories. An approach to this question emerges in attending to artworks as relational sites in which difference is encountered without being reduced. Here, opacity is approached as an ethical and aesthetic refusal that unsettles the colonizing gaze, opening onto another mode of relation —one that does not aim to grasp or master the artwork but remains open to what exceeds comprehension.

This movement away from mastery and toward forms of ethical exposure opens a pathway for rethinking vision, not as a means of securing knowledge, but as a form of contact that

⁴ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (South End Press, 1990), 54.

⁵ Édouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation* (The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94.

resists mastery. In developing such an approach, I take as my point of departure Lévinas' notion of *the caress*, reconceptualized as an embodied and sensuous mode of vision grounded in vulnerability and exposure. Understood in this way, the caress offers a mode of approach that situates the viewer in a position of ethical vulnerability, particularly when the viewer approaches the work from a position of structural privilege. My assertion is that Lévinas offers a way toward a nonviolent approach to alterity grounded in the recognition of a singular and irreducible otherness. The caressing gaze names a mode of approach that preserves the gap between the one who approaches and that which is approached. Read alongside Glissant's "demand for the right to opacity," this conception offers a way of thinking relationality that respects difference without requiring transparency or understanding.⁶

This dissertation contributes to debates on ethics, art, and visual culture by developing an approach to images and artworks shaped by colonial visual regimes, in which being seen often entails being rendered as knowable, and where to be known is to risk subjugation. This logic of precarious visibility forms the backdrop against which Glissant formulates his demand for opacity.⁷ Rather than approaching these works primarily as representational objects whose meaning is to be secured, this project attends to how relations are staged and unsettled, through their material, spatial, and formal configurations. Throughout this dissertation, ethics is conceptualized not as a moral framework applied to artworks, but as a relational practice that unfolds in the encounter between artwork and beholder. In this context, opacity functions not merely as a limit to Western Enlightenment modes of knowledge, but as a force that reconfigures how form appears and how relations between viewer and artwork may unfold.

The project also contributes to art historical scholarship by providing an extended formal and theoretical analysis of Frida Orupabo's practice. While Orupabo's practice has often been discussed in relation to representation, identity, and the colonial archive, this dissertation approaches her work through the ethical implications of form, materiality, and spatial construction, attending to how these shape the way the relation between artwork and beholder unfolds.

⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189; Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, with J. Michael Dash, CARAF Books (University Press of Virginia, 1989), 2.

⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*.

1.1 Research Questions and Rationale

- 1) What constitutes an ethical approach to images and artworks that are shaped by, or respond to, colonial histories of looking?
- 2) What is the relation between ethics and form in Frida Orupabo's works?

This dissertation examines how we can ethically approach images and artworks that emerge from, or respond to, colonial histories of looking, focusing on the collage practice of Frida Orupabo. Rather than regarding ethics as a set of external criteria applied to artworks, the project understands ethics as a mode of approach that is shaped through the encounter with visual form itself. The project investigates how visual form—particularly cutting as a material operation that enables practices of layering, pinning, and fragmentation, and reconstellation—can be understood as both an aesthetic and ethical refusal of the archive's demand for legibility and the stabilization of representational coherence.

In Orupabo's collages, the act of cutting into colonial images does not merely represent historical violence but materially intervenes in the photograph's surface, reorganizing the conditions of viewing by producing a gap that resists the demand for representational coherence and epistemic mastery that structure colonial visual regimes. Here, epistemic mastery refers to the drive to render the Other fully knowable and legible within representational frameworks, thereby securing it as an object of knowledge. In this sense, Orupabo's cut unsettles forms of relation premised on transparency and legibility.

Accordingly, the project attends to form as a site where relations are staged or disrupted, or more precisely, where form stages an encounter that resists stabilization within the visual field. This framework invites an approach that questions the separation between ethics and form.

This dissertation explores these questions by bringing together Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity and Emmanuel Lévinas concept of the caress.⁸ I develop an ethical approach to images shaped by colonial visual regimes, an approach that seeks to resist demands for transparency and full understanding as preconditions for relation. This inquiry stems from my

⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press, 1969); Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Duquesne University Press, 1998).

own position as a white cis-gendered woman engaging with artworks emerging from, or responding to, histories of racialized representation—where the risk of reproducing colonial ways of seeing remains an ongoing ethical concern.

The caressing gaze is grounded in Lévinas' account of sensibility and exposure. This ethical structure calls upon us to respond to every Other as singular and irreducible. While the ethical demand applies universally, the conditions under which artworks are encountered are not neutral. The caressing gaze thus emerges, in my project, from a specific concern: how to approach artworks shaped by racialized violence and the colonial gaze's drive to homogenize difference from a position historically implicated in regimes of visual mastery. In this sense, the method does not restrict the ethical encounter to particular viewers. Instead, it foregrounds how the mode of approach must remain accountable to the histories that structure vision, without presuming that such accountability can ever be fully secured. It is an ethical orientation that, following Glissant, is oriented toward safeguarding opacity, while also attending to the asymmetries that mark the act of seeing. Together, these questions and conceptual orientations frame the dissertation's investigation of how ethical engagement may be negotiated through form.

1.2 Contextual Background – Orupabo’s Work

Frida Orupabo has situated her practice in relation to bell hooks’ concept of the oppositional gaze.⁹ In, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” hooks argues that Black people have historically been “denied the right to gaze,” a prohibition violently enforced under slavery and reproduced within racialized power relations. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of resistance within relations of power and on Stuart Hall’s reflections on representation and identity in “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” hooks contends that this historical suppression fostered “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.”¹⁰ Although the term is often associated with the returned gaze of the figures in Orupabo’s collages, it can also be used to understand Orupabo’s own position in relation to the colonial archive. In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” hooks emphasizes the potential for power and agency in looking back and interrogating the dominant gaze. As she writes,

In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.¹¹

This insistence on agency in the field of vision grounds hooks’ critique of Laura Mulvey’s framework, which she challenges for its disregard of race. For hooks, Black female spectatorship cannot be captured within the gendered binary of the male gaze and the passive female subject that Mulvey outlines, as Black women are subjected to both cinematic erasure and hyper visible but distorted stereotypes.¹² The oppositional gaze thus opens a critical space that unsettles the binary oppositions posited by Mulvey. As hooks notes, quoting Annette Kuhn, this act carries with it “the pleasure of resistance, of saying 'no': not to 'unsophisticated' enjoyment...but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically.” Yet

⁹ See for example: Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, “In Frida Orupabo’s Collages, the Black Feminine Figure Is a Rich Expressive Force,” *Aperture*, November 17, 2021, <https://aperture.org/editorial/in-frida-orupabo-collages-the-black-feminine-figure-is-a-rich-expressive-force/>.

¹⁰ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. Sue Thornham, A Reader (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 307–8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrtm8.30>.

¹¹ hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 308.

¹² In quotations from hooks, I retain her original spelling (“black”), though in my own writing I use the capitalized “Black” to emphasize its status as a cultural, historical, and political identity.

where Kuhn frames this primarily within feminist critiques of phallocentrism, hooks extends the argument to insist that racialized looking relations must be confronted.¹³

Hooks' discussion of the oppositional gaze is directed primarily toward Black female spectatorship and the politics of Black and white representation in film. I do not attempt to extend her theorization of spectatorship here; rather, I take her emphasis on resistance in the field of vision as a point of departure. I situate Orupabo's reworking of colonial photographs, as well as more contemporary images of the racialized and gendered body, within a broader lineage of visual resistance, while keeping distinct the stakes of hooks' project and my own. As hooks contends "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."¹⁴ In other words, under oppressive visual regimes, the act of redirecting one's gaze becomes a way of asserting agency.

For hooks, this critical mode of Black female spectatorship is a response to the ways in which racism is reproduced through visual culture. She further argues that representation is marked by racial asymmetries, particularly in the way Blackness is positioned under the white gaze. She emphasizes that, in a context of white dominance, images of Black subjects are produced within ideological frameworks that position Blackness as an object.¹⁵ The oppositional gaze for hooks is linked to a resistant spectatorship that is both affective and analytical, while also exceeding resistance through the pleasure and agency of interrogation. As she recalls:

When I returned to films as a young woman, after a long period of silence, I had developed an oppositional gaze. Not only would I not be hurt by the absence of black female presence, or the insertion of violating representation, I interrogated the work, cultivated a way to look past race and gender for aspects of content, form, language.¹⁶

Here, hooks describes developing a gaze that resists the passive consumption of distorted or absent representation, insisting instead on interrogating the structures of content, form and language that shape how images signify. She concludes by linking the oppositional gaze to a critical practice of "[l]ooking and looking back," in which Black women use history to understand the present and to imagine different futures and create "alternative texts."¹⁷ In this sense, the oppositional gaze is not only reactive but *transformative*, constituting new forms of

¹³ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 313.

¹⁴ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 308.

¹⁵ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 308.

¹⁶ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 313.

¹⁷ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 317, 319.

subjectivity within representation. Orupabo echoes this emphasis on resisting objectifying frames when she explains:

I have always been interested in removing the subjects from those [the colonial archive] frames. You cannot remove them completely, but you can take them out of that particular context that is so violently objectifying.¹⁸

While this recalls hooks' insistence on the gaze as a site of resistance and critical interrogation, Orupabo's own process involves turning to the colonial archive, cutting and recontextualizing its images in ways that unsettle their original function, participating in what hooks describes as the ongoing struggle over "the control of images" and the field of representation as a terrain of contestation.¹⁹

Drawing on hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze, I situate Orupabo's reworking of colonial photographs, as well as other more contemporary representations of the body, within a lineage of critical, analytic, and resistant spectatorship. If hooks describes oppositional looking as a practice of "interrogation" and even "deconstruction" of visual narratives that "devalued, objectified, dehumanized" the black female subject, Orupabo's material interventions into colonial photographs can be understood as a related operation at the level of form.²⁰ While hooks theorizes resistant spectatorship and the creation of "alternative texts" as a practice enabling new forms of self-definition and agency, my project turns toward the ethical implications of formal fragmentation of the photograph itself—asking how material interventions into the image may reconfigure relations in ways that cannot be fully captured in terms of subject formation or political agency.

Orupabo's practice can be understood as foregrounding material and formal reconfigurations into the image itself. This shift from spectatorship to material intervention clarifies why my focus in this dissertation turns toward the relation between ethics and form. Orupabo's formal strategies—particularly the cutting and recontextualizing of photographic material—can be read as reconfiguring more than the images themselves. They open onto a reconfiguration of the relations of looking that such images sustain. In this sense, Orupabo's practice resonates

¹⁸ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with the author, October 28, 2024. This was subsequently confirmed and clarified in personal correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

¹⁹ "IN OUR GLORY: PHOTOGRAPHY AND BLACK LIFE," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, by bell hooks (The New Press, 1995), 57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.28799907>, where she speaks of how African-Americans used photography to excersize a "control of images," carving out spaces of identity beyond the white gaze.

²⁰ hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 316.

with the resistant force hooks describes, while opening onto questions of how ethics and form intersect in visual practice.

1.3 Methodological Orientation – Approaching the Work

1.3.1 The colonial archive

Throughout this dissertation the term *colonial archive* is used in the broad, artist-defined sense articulated by Orupabo herself, discussed in Chapter 2, referring to the circulating body of colonial-era photographic images, particularly images of Black subjects, now widely accessible online. Rather than designating a singular institutional repository, the term functions here to describe a dispersed visual field shaped by colonial histories and ongoing regimes of representation.

1.3.2 Form, Representation, and Critical Emphasis

As Art Historian Kobena Mercer notes, “[b]efore we can say what art is about, our sensory engagement tells us that form comes first.” Yet, as he stresses, “the primacy of the aesthetic dimension...receives the least attention in discussions of work by black artists”.²¹ He goes on to write;

Race is acknowledged at the level of content in social histories of art but is dismissed as irrelevant in the art for art’s sake formalism that influenced institutional adherence to ideas of intrinsic “quality” as a category elevating aesthetics into a transcendental realm of timelessness.²²

In other words, Mercer argues that formal questions are often sidelined when attending to the work of Black artists, as critical attention tends to concentrate on representation. His intervention underscores the need to attend to form without abandoning questions of representation. Taking this provocation seriously, my analysis turns to the act of cutting as an aesthetic gesture. Whereas the fragment is a material outcome, the cut can be approached as a site of formal intervention. I suggest that this act of cutting shapes both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Frida Orupabo’s work.

²¹ Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Duke University Press, 2016), 20.

²² Mercer, *Travel & See*, 20.

By emphasizing cutting, I highlight Orupabo's disruption of the colonial visual regime, which operated through strategies of categorization and classification of physical traits, reducing subjectivity to skin, bone, and surface, thereby fixing the racialized body to regimes of representation.²³ In contrast to the fragment, which is tied to representation, the cut actively unsettles representation. This shift invites us to reconsider not just the meaning of fragments but the broader implications of what the act of cutting does. It opens up the possibility of exploring not only what remains visible, but how meaning itself can be suspended, deferred, or withheld. Put differently, whereas the fragment can still be absorbed into meaning-making, the cut foregrounds concepts of rupture, refusal, and opacity —processes that resist stabilization, generate temporal disturbances, and *open up a space of relation not fully graspable within representation*. If the cut opens a space that cannot be understood as a site of representation, this also calls for a reorientation of how the works are approached. The question of how aesthetic expression that withholds itself from legibility may alter the course of interpretation has also been taken up by Édouard Glissant. By foregrounding the cut in relation to the fragment, I aim to emphasize formal intervention while also responding to Glissant's insistence that new forms of aesthetic expression can open onto new modes of relation that do not depend on transparency or legibility as conditions of engagement.²⁴ In this way, the distinction between fragment and cut is not a formal classification of visual elements, but a methodological orientation that shapes how the works are approached, interpreted, and withheld from interpretive mastery. While the cut inevitably intersects with epistemic, affective, and temporal registers, I treat these not as separate domains but as effects generated by its material and ethical structuring.

1.3.3 The Caressing gaze

Glissant's perspective prompts us to consider how our understanding of visibility shapes relations. This entails an epistemological shift away from Western Enlightenment's ideal of clarity, transparency, and mastery —and from the expectation that everything must be rendered legible within a rational framework. While Glissant articulates an ethics of opacity, this ethics is not developed through a sustained engagement with vision as a modality of

²³ I will return to this discussion in Chapter 3.

²⁴ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 107.

power.²⁵ Here, Emmanuel Lévinas' critique of vision as mastery becomes crucial.²⁶ His ethical philosophy offers a way to respond to Glissant's "demand for the right to opacity" as a condition for an ethical relation, grounding opacity as irreducible singularity within an ethical relation that resists reduction and possession.²⁷

By refusing the premise of transparency and legibility as conditions for relation, this dissertation conceives interpretation itself as an ethically constrained practice, shaped by the necessity of preserving difference rather than subsuming it. At this point, I turn to Lévinas' notion of the caress as an ethical structure for approaching the Other that is not one of determination and seizure. This approach is developed under the ethical constraint articulated by Glissant in his "demand for the right to opacity."²⁸ This reorientation signals a fundamental shift—reconfiguring vision as an embodied, sensual, and affective mode of engagement rather than as the primary ontological model of subject-object relation. Precisely because Lévinas does not develop an ethics of vision as such, I reconceptualize his notion of the caress in relation to visual analysis. This reconceptualization develops a way of approaching the artwork from a position of ethical vulnerability and exposure on the part of the viewer, particularly when the viewer approaches the work from a position of structural privilege. In doing so, my use of vision opens up Lévinas' formulation of the caress rather than reproducing a Lévinasian account of seeing, a move described in depth in Chapter 5.

1.4 Limitations and Delimitations

This dissertation is shaped around a set of theoretical, epistemological, and disciplinary commitments that define the scope of the inquiry. While it engages extensively with the colonial archive as a visual and epistemic regime, it does not undertake archival research in the sense of historical reconstruction or source-based analysis. Instead, the archive is approached as a historically constituted system of classification and visual ordering, theorized through existing critical scholarship. Furthermore, this dissertation does not seek to recuperate, restore, or speak on behalf of the subjectivities represented within the colonial

²⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94.

²⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

²⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94; Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

²⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2.

archive, but instead examines how formal interventions may intervene in the archive's epistemic claims.

This dissertation does not offer a comprehensive art–historical study of collage or fragmentation as formal categories. While practices of collage, montage and cutting are traced selectively and genealogically in Section 3.2 and 3.3, they are mobilized in service of a broader aesthetic and ethical argument rather than as an exhaustive medium–specific history. The project is thus positioned as an aesthetic- theoretical inquiry concerned with the cut as aesthetic and ethical form.

While informal studio conversations with Frida Orupabo arose during two visits to her studio to view works, this dissertation does not pursue a biographical explanation, nor does it claim access to artistic intention or lived experience. This refusal of intentionality is consistent with the project's broader ethical commitment to resisting interpretive mastery and preserving the work's right to opacity. In doing so, it also acknowledges the asymmetries that structure acts of looking, particularly in relation to racialized photographs produced within colonial regimes of visibility, and resists reproducing the extractive interpretive frameworks that have historically governed their interpretation.

1.5 Theoretical Framing

It is important to clarify how this dissertation uses the terms “we” and “Other.” When I ask how “we” might approach images and artworks that emerge from, or respond to, colonial histories of looking ethically, I refer specifically to viewers and scholars positioned within Western epistemic and institutional traditions—a location that includes myself. This is not a universal spectator, but a historically and culturally situated one. Likewise, the Other, appears in this dissertation in two distinct but intersecting senses: first, as the racialized and colonially constructed Other produced through the visual regimes traced in Chapter 3 and 4; and second, as the Lévinasian ethical Other (the Face) whose irreducible alterity resists comprehension on a metaphysical level. The Lévinasian sense of alterity invoked here is not defined in terms of its opposition to the Self. It is a non-comparative Other that does not designate a social category or identity but instead names the irreducible singularity of any other. As Lévinas articulates it: the Other “is a being situated beyond every attribute we have as its effect to

qualify him, that is, to reduce him to what common with other beings, to make of him a concept.”²⁹

These genealogies of alterity remain analytically distinct but converge around a central problem: how to encounter difference without reducing and assimilating it into familiar frameworks of knowledge. This question underlies the ethical and methodological concerns developed in the chapters that follow, particularly the demand for a mode of approaching visual artworks attentive to the Other's difference without demanding transparency.

Importantly, the artwork is not equated with the Other but understood as a site in which relations to alterity are staged and at times contested. Accordingly, I do not approach artworks as ethical subjects or claim that they possess “Face” in the Lévinasian sense, although I agree with Judith Butler that, at times “images imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation.” Rather, I draw from what Lévinas names the ethical structure of the Face, the ethical conditions of approach; non-appropriation, exposure, and embodied responsiveness.³⁰ In this sense, Glissant’s concept of opacity informs the methodological orientation of the dissertation, not as a withdrawal of relation, but as a refusal of transparency and legibility as conditions for it.³¹

1.5.1 The colonial gaze

By “colonial gaze” I refer to historically sedimented modes of looking that detach the body from relational and embodied contexts and render it as object, specimen, or type through classificatory regimes of knowledge and control. Within such visual economies, racialized difference is produced and stabilized through hierarchies that structure who is seen, how, and under which conditions.

²⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 100, trans. Alphonso Lingis, *Phaenomenologica* (Nijhoff, 1987), 41.

³⁰ Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, SPECIAL ISSUE WITH THE SOCIETY FOR PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY (2012), Vol. 26, no. No.2 (2012): 135.

³¹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

1.5.2 Opacity and Ethics of Non-mastery

While Glissant formulates opacity as a universal right — the right of *every* subject not to be fully understood — the stakes of this right are not evenly distributed.³² Opacity becomes ethically and politically urgent in contexts shaped by historical violence and racialized regimes of visibility. In this sense, opacity is universal in principle but asymmetrical in practice: its ethical force heightened where the right not to be understood has been structurally denied. While opacity is interconnected with other core concepts in Glissant's poetics, such as Relation, creolization, and errantry, it is foregrounded here because it most directly addresses the dissertation's ethical and methodological concerns, particularly the relation between legibility, resistance, and non-appropriative forms of engagement. This focus follows the precedent set by scholars such as Asbjørn Grønstad, who have approached opacity as a distinct lens through which to consider the ethical dimensions of visual form.³³ Opacity provides a framework through which to examine how ethics and form intersect in Orupabo's practice and how visual form may resist epistemic violence. Building on this framework, this dissertation develops a methodological approach grounded in Lévinas' notion of the caress as an ethics of approach, while opacity offers a lens that resists totalization and demands non-appropriative engagement. Together, these frameworks provide the basis for developing an ethical mode of approaching art that remains responsive to difference and resistant to mastery.

1.5.3 The Risks of Over-Theorizing Opacity

Any attempt to frame opacity — even one that foregrounds its relational, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions — encounters a tension: theorizing opacity too definitively may undermine the very resistance it enacts. Patrick Crowley identifies this risk, warning that opacity, when too seamlessly theorized or exemplified, risks becoming only “provisionally opaque,” ultimately confirming the Western reader's capacity for comprehension.³⁴ My

³² Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 194.

³³ Asbjørn Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/film.2019.0123>; Asbjørn Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

³⁴ Patrick Crowley raises this concern, directed at readings such as Celia Britton's, that when opacité is too meticulously analyzed through hermeneutic readings rooted in context, it risks becoming only “provisionally opaque,” a form of resistance that “ultimately convinces the Western reader of his or her powers of understanding” Patrick Crowley, “Édouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacité,” *Romance Studies* 24, no. 2 (2006): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581506x120073>.

engagement with opacity focuses on the ways opacity interrupts Western Enlightenments demand for legibility and resists the subsumption of difference into preconceived systems of knowledge. Glissant himself warns against those who “turn in circles within a code,” seeking to legitimize their frameworks by presenting them as “scientific,” even as language and meaning begin to slip away “toward other, fruitful and unpredictable” paths. As he writes; “Opacities must be preserved; an appetite for opportune obscurity in translation must be created..... The framework is not made of transparency.”³⁵ Rather than translating opacity into clarity, the aim is to *remain with* its resistance —its ethical refusal, and its aesthetic affective force. In doing so, I approach opacity as a sustained challenge to appropriation, assimilation, and mastery. This reading does not resolve opacity but affirms its irreducibility as a condition of relation.

The discussion is informed by readings that situate opacity within a postcolonial framework. As Celia Britton, Patrick Crowley and Adlai Murdoch have argued, Glissant’s notion of opacity lends itself to a postcolonial reading. Murdoch firmly anchors the concept of opacity within the historical and ongoing struggle of formerly colonized peoples, to establish an “independent identity matrix” outside what he defines, following Glissant, as the restrictive interpretive grids of Western universalism.³⁶ Crowley, emphasizes opacity as an integral part of Glissant’s “consistent meditations on the cultural consequences of colonization and the transatlantic slave trade” positing it as a specifically postcolonial mode of resistance.³⁷ He notes that the resistance offered by opacity is directed at the Western mode of thought, which Glissant identifies as “a project, not a place,” that privileged transparency and sought to seize or categorize the non-European subject.³⁸

As Professor of French and Comparative Literature Nicole Simek cautions, Glissant’s call for “the right to opacity” can be misread as “an inherent property or identity in need of recognition,” a move that would re-essentialize difference and reproduce the very frameworks that Glissant’s intervention seeks to unsettle.³⁹ This essentialist reading, she

³⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 120.

³⁶ Adlai Murdoch, “Glissant’s Opacité and the De-Nationalization of Identity,” *The CLR James Journal* 18, no. 1 (2012): 14.

³⁷ Although Crowley argues that opacity lends itself to a post-colonial reading he points out that it ultimately “exceeds” the limits of that domain to “unsettle categorical systems of thought that are allied to power.” See: Crowley, “Édouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacité.” *Romance Studies* 24, no. 2, (2006).

³⁸ Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 107–8; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2.

³⁹ Nicole Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” *Symploke* 23, nos. 1–2 (2015): 366, <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.23.1-2.0363>.

argues, ignores that the demand for opacity, described by Glissant as “stubborn shadows” or “stubborn densities,” is employed to resist the “seeming naturalness and imperceptible density” of neocolonial domination.⁴⁰ Instead, Simek argues that opacity should be understood *not* as a metaphysical attribute of certain subjects but as “as an active mode of resistance that emerges in response to particular political problems.” It functions as a necessary counter to the Western demand for transparency that relies on “reducing and hierarchizing”, rather than a “sacral[ized] unknowability that places the Other beyond relation.”⁴¹ Drawing on Chamoiseau, Simek argues that opacity “thickens” rather than forecloses interpretation. It alters the terms of relation without withdrawing from it and instead prompts “an impetus to open-ended interpretation.” This distinction is crucial for my argument: opacity is not an ontological fact about the Other but an ethical and aesthetic orientation that resists the demand for transparency and gestures toward modes of engagement that remain accountable while refusing mastery.⁴²

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the research questions and rationale, outlines the material and methodological orientation, and develops the theoretical framework that guides the dissertation, while also providing an overview of relevant earlier research. Chapter 2 situates Frida Orupabo’s practice within material, digital, and archival conditions that influence her work, tracing her biography, modes of image sourcing, and early engagement with colonial photographic material. By examining how her collage practice emerges from the circulation of colonial images online, the chapter begins to establish the historical and epistemic terrain upon which the later theoretical and methodological arguments unfold.

Chapter 3 traces the genealogy of vision as a tool of domination by examining how scientific, colonial, and artistic visual regimes have produced and regulated racial difference. Before turning to the emergence of collage and photomontage as an aesthetic and epistemic rupture, the chapter traces the transformation of the racialized body into a scientific and colonial specimen, thereby marking an epistemic shift through which the racialized body was

⁴⁰ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 363.

⁴¹ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 366, 372.

⁴² Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

reconstituted within regimes of scientific and colonial knowledge. Rather than offering a comprehensive history of the collage or fragmentation as formal categories, the chapter situates certain practices of fragmentation, montage and cutting as critical responses to these regimes. It foregrounds how aesthetic rupture, as a formal intervention, may destabilize visual mastery and intervene in the archive's epistemic claims. This genealogical framework prepares the ground for the dissertation's turn to opacity by tracing how technical and formal strategies were utilized to disrupt visual and representational coherence. In doing so it opens onto ethical questions of legibility, representation, and their relation to power structures, that ultimately are ethical in scope.

Chapter 4 marks the dissertation's transition from genealogy to ethics and aesthetics. It develops Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity as a critique of the rationalist demand for clarity, transparency, and epistemic mastery, the same epistemic orientation that underwrote the visual regimes examined in Chapter 3. Whereas Chapter 3 traced how vision was instrumentalized for epistemic control, Chapter 4 introduces opacity as a refusal of the demand that relation be grounded in legibility.

In Chapter 5 I introduce Lévinas' critique of vision as mastery. It frames the chapter's central question: how Lévinas reconfigures ethical relation in ways that resist visual appropriation. It establishes the ground for rethinking vision in relation to alterity, exploring how Lévinas' concept of the Face offers a way to think about visual encounters that does not reduce the Other to a legible, knowable image. This concern becomes central for rethinking how images and artworks that emerge from or respond to colonial histories of looking might be approached, as is the case with Frida Orupabo's work.

In Chapter 6 I develop a methodological framework that draws on Lévinas' notion of the caress as an ethics of approach, while Glissant's notion of opacity deepens this framework by situating the refusal of mastery within the historical and epistemic violences of colonial modernity. Building on Lévinas, I develop *the caressing gaze* as a way of approaching the artwork from a position of ethical vulnerability and exposure. The chapter then turns to the act of cutting as both an epistemic and aesthetic operation that unsettles inherited regimes of visual knowledge. In "The Cut as Aesthetic and Ethical Form," I trace how cutting in Frida Orupabo's digital and physical collages unfolds as both an aesthetic gesture and ethical intervention. The cut is approached through its different material and conceptual registers—epistemic, ethical, affective, and temporal—and in relation to a lineage of montage practices

that challenge colonial regimes of visibility. Building on earlier discussions of the Black Audio Film Collective's reworking of archival montage, this chapter situates Orupabo's practice within a tradition that rethinks form as a site of resistance and relation.

Chapter 7 undertakes a close analysis of selected works by Frida Orupabo, examining how formal strategies of cutting, layering, and spatial articulation open up an interstitial space of relation that is not fully graspable within re-presentation. Drawing on the methodological framework developed in Chapter 6, the analysis attends to how opacities emerge through formal relations without being reducible to them. The encounter between artwork and beholder, as configured through these formal strategies, may open onto encounters that unsettle the demand for transparency and legibility as a precondition for relation. Instead, they invite a mode of relation that remains open to what exceeds comprehension. Chapter 8 brings together ethics, form, and opacity and points to possible curatorial applications.

1.7 Material

This dissertation engages with selected works by Frida Orupabo, with particular focus on her collages and installations realized as three-dimensional objects. The works are selected on the basis that each stages a distinct configuration of cutting, allowing the analysis to trace how the act of cutting reorganizes spatial relations, material surfaces, and conditions of viewing. Rather than a comprehensive survey of the artist's oeuvre, the analysis focuses on works that in different ways allow for an examination of cutting as a material practice and of its formal configurations. The primary material includes *Untitled*, (2017), two works titled *Untitled* (2018), three works titled *Untitled* (2019), the site-specific installation *the mouth and the truth* (2019), *Baby in Belly* (2020), *Two Heads* (2022), *Cloud of Confusion* (2024), and *Of Course Everything is Real* (2024). In addition, the dissertation considers Orupabo's Instagram practice as a site where cutting unfolds as an ongoing, recursive gesture across digital and material platforms. The works are examined through close formal analysis, attentive to spatial fragmentation, material disturbance, and the reconfiguration of relations.

In addition to the works themselves, the dissertation draws on published interviews given by the artist, and on conversations conducted during studio visits in 2024, where I was allowed to observe aspects of the artist's working process. These conversations function as contextual

material that situates the material decision-making without determining the interpretation of the works.

1.8 Earlier Research

To date, there has been limited sustained research on Frida Orupabo's work. One of the most substantial contributions is Eivind Røssaak's essay in the anthology *Kunst som deling, delingens kunst* (2020). Røssaak situates Orupabo's work within a long avant-garde tradition of photomontage and "cut-up" collage that traces back to the Dadaists and Surrealists of the 1920s.⁴³ Introduces the term "Instagrammatics," he focuses on the transformation of digital photomontages into large-scale physical works and the medial negotiations involved when the work is moved from Instagram to the gallery space. This shift, argues Røssaak, allows the gallery to 'solve' the challenge of her digital origins by highlighting familiar art-historical resonances.⁴⁴

In addition to Røssaak's essay, a number of articles have been published in connection with her exhibitions and two exhibition catalogues containing scholarly contributions on Orupabo's work. One was published in relation to her solo exhibition Kunsthall Trondheim in 2021, and the second in relation to her exhibition at Bonniers and Astrup Fearnley in 2024-25. These contributions have primarily framed Orupabo's practice within Black feminist and postcolonial frameworks, emphasizing instability, archival reconfiguration, and the politics of the gaze. Although several of these authors, most notably Mai Takawira and Nina Cramer, attend to the affective impact of Orupabo's fragmented collages, sustained attention has not been given to the relation between ethics and form, nor to the methodological stakes of approaching archival images marked by historical violence.

My earlier engagement with Orupabo's work in my MA thesis *Skin of Memory* (2021) approached her practice through trauma theory and affects studies, reading the material "gap" in *Untitled*, 2018 as a site of sensory memory and return. While this framework emphasized embodied spectatorship —combining both affective and intellectual operations and attending

⁴³ Eivind Røssaak, "Kunsthall Trondheims nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo," in *Kunst som deling, delingens kunst*, 1. utgave., ed. Merete Jonvik et al. (Fagbokforlaget, 2020), 47.

⁴⁴ Røssaak, "Kunsthall Trondheims nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo."

to their dynamic oscillation —the present dissertation departs from an empathic model of engagement, understood, following Jill Bennett as “a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other’s experience to the self,” to investigate the relation between ethics and form, and how the work intervenes in historically sedimented conditions of legibility and relationality.⁴⁵

Asbjørn Grønstad’s *The film and the Ethical Imagination* (2016) marks an important intervention in aesthetic theory by arguing that formal operations generate a pre-ontological ethics through which alterity may be encountered. Situating his work within the ethical turn in film studies, Grønstad proposes that the cut opens aesthetic works onto alterity, ultimately allowing opacity to manifest *within representational form*.⁴⁶ In doing so cinematic form may unsettle hegemonic frameworks of vision that predetermine what is seen or not seen.⁴⁷ This dissertation builds on Grønstad’s claim that ethics cannot be reduced to externally applied moral criteria and must be addressed at the level of form. However, it departs from his model by shifting attention from how the cut renders opacity available for encounter *within* representation. Instead, I focus on how the cut disrupts the representational conditions themselves, unsettling the structures that organize hegemonic visual and epistemological modes of relationality. I argue that in Frida Orupabo’s practice, the cut suspends the stabilizing logic of representation itself. In doing so, it produces an interstitial space that unsettles the epistemological conditions under which relationality becomes organized as legible and knowable. While Grønstad looks at what form does —how it performs or embodies ethics—other scholars of cinema have mobilized Lévinas in related ways. One example is Associate Professor Kristin Lené Hole. In *Towards a feminist cinematic ethics: Claire Denis, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jean-Luc Nancy* (2016), she takes Claire Denis films as her point of departure to articulate an “aesthetic of alterity” grounded in embodiment, ambiguity, and sensuous spectatorship. The “aesthetic of alterity” is developed through an encounter between Denis films and the ethics of Lévinas. Taking Lévinas’ concepts of “the saying” (ethical pre-intentional contact) and “the said” (representation) as her point of departure, Hole extends this distinction to cinematic materiality. She argues that Denis’ film opens the “possibility of a representation that maintains the saying over the said,” by

⁴⁵ Ingvild Kristine Melby, “Skin of memory” (Master thesis, 2021), <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/88245>; Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 8–10.

⁴⁶ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7,8, 198–201.

⁴⁷ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 93.

withholding the illusion of a total and coherent view of the subjects she portrays.⁴⁸ Building on Judith Butler, Hole argues that ethical cinematic form must reveal its failure to capture the Other thereby opening up representation to encounters that resist full thematization.⁴⁹ Whereas Hole and Grønstad examine how form facilitates ethical encounters *within* representation, this dissertation shifts attention to how material and spatial interventions into the photographic surface. These interventions unsettle the representational field, foregrounding the cut as a spatial and material disruption. My project suggests that Orupabo's collages suspend the fixing logic of the archive that historically renders certain bodies legible. Through the agitating and affective force of the cut the works invite a different mode of approach by exposing and unsettling the viewer's perceived claim to representational mastery over the image-object. This invitation into a mode of relation with what is in excess of meaning and conceptualization lays the foundation for the methodological framework developed in the dissertation, where I draw on Lévinas' rethinking of sensibility to articulate a non-appropriative mode of approach to alterity that respects Glissant's demand for "the right to opacity."⁵⁰ This move is conceptually adjacent to Hole's argument, but with significant divergences. In Hole's account, Denis' film reorients the viewing subject from detached, cognitive observation toward vision as a haptic organ vulnerable to affective intrusion. Ultimately, Hole argues for the films pedagogical function as a "training ground" that cultivates a mode of viewing that stays with difference without attempting to resolve it.⁵¹ Hole, participating in a broader tendency within Lévinasian art theory to attribute to aesthetic form the capacity to approximate the Face, productively challenges Lévinas' suspicion of art by suggesting that Denis's work "refutes Lévinas's often condemnatory position on art," and even has the capacity "to show us the face of the other."⁵² Where Hole argues that the work approximates or performs the ethical encounter, I argue that Orupabo's work does not ground or guarantee the ethical demand. Rather, it renders visible the instability of the viewer's perceived claim to representational mastery. Contrary to Hole, my articulation of the caressing gaze as a mode of approach emerges through the need to conceptualize an ethical mode of engagement to images and artworks that emerge from, or respond to, colonial visual regimes where being seen often entails being rendered as knowable, and where to be known

⁴⁸ Kristin Lené Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics: Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy* (University Press, 2016), 97, 102, 111, 131, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474403283>.

⁴⁹ Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics*, 5.

⁵⁰ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94.

⁵¹ Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics*, 16, 30, 105.

⁵² Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics*, 87.

is to risk subjugation. An ethical approach to images or artworks that arise in the context of historical violence cannot be contingent on whether the work stages such destabilization. Although ethical responsibility cannot depend on aesthetic disruption, this articulation of the caressing gaze in my project remains attentive to the material and spatial reconfigurations that take place in the encounter between the artwork and beholder rather than imposed independently of them. By placing Lévinas in conversation with Glissant my project seeks to develop a mode of viewing oriented toward safeguarding opacity, while also attending to the asymmetries that mark the act of looking in colonial visual regimes.

Within Lévinasian art theory, several readers have sought to renegotiate the status of figuration itself. Philippe Crignon in “Figuration: Emmanuel Lévinas and the Image,” for instance, has similarly sought to rethink the relation between figuration and alterity, the phenomenal and the transcendent, albeit on a more ontological level. Figuration, Crignon argues, is not reducible to representational capture; rather, it names the unstable threshold between visibility and what exceeds it. Even though the Face cannot be *seen*, Crignon *et al.* emphasize that it remains “the origin of visibility,” and that what is “devoid” of form is what nevertheless “makes forms possible”.⁵³ In Hagi Kenaan’s *Facing Images: After Lévinas* (2011), Kenaan develops a phenomenology of how the image may come to “face” us by suspending an objectifying intentionality. The image’s being lies in its “facing,” defined by the image’s “turning toward the viewe[r].” This “turning” is the image’s unique mode of self-presentation, and what separates them from objects.⁵⁴ This visual condition opens up a relation with the viewer where the image is never only “self-enclosed” it is a “being beyond itself toward a viewer: a facing”. As such, argues Kenaan, “an image can never be reduced to the kind of visual content framed by the eye.” In his later work, *The Ethics of Visuality: Lévinas and the Contemporary Gaze*, Kenaan argues, that ethical vision *emerges*, when objectifying intentionality collapses, allowing a gaze structured by “distantiality” and “orientation” to encounter alterity as Other rather than as an object. The ethical gaze is not prior but generated through disturbance, or as Kenaan puts it “what faces us when the rule of the object is undermined is not the Nothing but the Other.”⁵⁵ Yet, even where figuration is

⁵³ Philippe Crignon, “Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image,” trans. Nicole Simek and Zahi Zalloua, *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 108,125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182507>.

⁵⁴ Hagi Kenaan, “Facing Images: After Levinas,” *Angelaki* 16, no. 1 (2011): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2011.564370>.

⁵⁵ Hagi Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze*, International Library of Contemporary Philosophy (I.B. Tauris, 2013), 3:20.

reclaimed, ethical relation is contingent on the image's capacity to destabilize objectifying intentionality. My project, however, departs from this transposition of transcendence into the ontology of visibility. While I argue that Orupabo's cuts materially reconfigures the conditions of encounter by unsettling representational mastery, I do not attribute to art capacity to enact the Face or perform the saying in a Lévinasian sense. Rather than extending Lévinas' thought into an aesthetic transposition, I retain his insistence that asymmetry and responsibility precede representation and therefore cannot depend on the image's capacity to produce ontological rupture. Instead, I take his notion of the caress as my point of departure to develop the caressing gaze as a methodological approach, applicable beyond Orupabo's practice. This approach remains responsive to the asymmetries and regimes of legibility that structure colonial visibility without locating ethical authority in the artwork itself. Under conditions structured by colonial regimes of legibility, where objectifying intentionality is structurally embedded, grounding ethical rupture in the artwork risks reproducing hierarchies of whose alterity is acknowledged as irreducible. The caressing gaze does not name a moral disposition or a voluntary act of empathy; rather, it designates a structural reorientation of sensibility that suspends the demand for transparency and mastery, whether or not such suspension is aesthetically staged. This reorientation is essential under conditions where such demands are historically entangled with histories of colonial regimes of visibility.

2.0 Frida Orupabo: Biography and Artistic Practice

Frida Orupabo was born in Sarpsborg, Norway, in 1986, to a Nigerian father and a Norwegian mother. Her father returned to Nigeria when she was three years old, and she grew up with her mother and her sister. She has described her childhood as being shaped by life in a predominantly white community, where her heritage was constantly questioned. In interviews, Orupabo has reflected that growing up as a child of color in a white environment left her with a sense of not belonging and prompted her to question her identity. Rooted in her position as someone who neither fully fits the Norwegian mold nor fully identifies with her Nigerian heritage, this sense of estrangement was further compounded by her lack of connection to Nigerian culture, reinforcing her perception of being viewed as a foreigner in both Norway and among Nigerians.⁵⁶

In 2006, after graduating from upper secondary school where she studied *Tegning, Form og Farge* (drawing, form, and color), she began experimenting with digital collages, working privately with family albums in an effort to reconstruct childhood and identity.⁵⁷ Reflecting on this period, she described the friction of navigating both her Norwegian and Nigerian heritage. In her words, collage gave her “this incredible satisfaction in finding different pieces and putting them together —or forcing them together in a way.” This work, initially private, would soon begin to take shape more publicly when she started posting collages on Instagram. Many of these early works remain personal experimentations in the form of digital books.⁵⁸

After completing a master’s degree in Sociology at the University of Oslo, Orupabo worked full-time at the Pro-Center in Oslo with sex workers and survivors of human trafficking.⁵⁹ Listening daily to unfiltered stories of women shaped the themes that would come to

⁵⁶ Nina Nordbø, “Norsk stjerneskudd ble oppdaget på Instagram,” NRK, May 11, 2019, https://www.nrk.no/kultur/xl/frida-orupabo_-norsk-kunstsensasjon-i-venezia-1.14531365; Benedicte Ramm, “– I kunstverdenen er jeg en «nobody»,” www.dn.no, March 22, 2018, <https://www.dn.no/d2/kunst/frida-orupabo/gavin-brown/instagram/-i-kunstverdenen-er-jeg-en-nobody/2-1-293836>; Røssaak, “Kunstfeltets nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo.”

⁵⁷ Røssaak, “Kunstfeltets nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo,” 42.

⁵⁸ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 28 October 2024. This was subsequently confirmed in personal correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

⁵⁹ Orupabo submitted her master thesis titled “Å banke på stengte dører - En kvalitativ studie av organiserte afrikanske og norskafricanske kvinners syn på rasisme, feminisme og kjønnslikestilling i Norge : En kvalitativ studie av organiserte afrikanske og norskafricanske kvinners syn på rasisme, feminisme og kjønnslikestilling i Norge.» in 2011.

permeate her collage practice. She has articulated her acute awareness of her embodied identity in relation to the stories she encountered:

When I started, the largest group was Nigerian women. As a Black woman myself, I recognized and where familiar with many of their experiences and struggles. They were invisible and hyper-visible at the same time ⁶⁰

In 2013, while working at the Pro-center, Orupabo began posting on Instagram under the handle @nemiepeba. Her earliest posts mixed this dual orientation toward the personal and political dimensions of identity. They included self-portraits and family photographs, alongside references to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, Yoruba references, and themes of womanhood and identity. From the outset, she also incorporated colonial ethnographic imagery, including photographs from William Fagg's survey work in Nigeria alongside works by artists such as Kenyatta Hinkle, Marlene Dumas, and Carrie Mae Weems. Her posts ranged from direct uploads and re-posts to digital collages, often shared in bursts of five or six at a time, creating short sequences rather than posting isolated images. Her first digital collages, posted on Instagram in 2013, combined fragments from her family album with found images. Very soon she moved away from using her personal archive, working instead with images, film clips, texts, and quotations she found online. With this shift in material, she also began working predominantly in black-and-white (Figure 4 and 5).

In 2014, while employed full-time at the Pro-center, she was contacted by the video artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa after he had encountered Orupabo's Instagram feed. He initiated a series of exchanges that culminated in his invitation for her to participate in the exhibition *A Series of Utterly Improbable, yet Extraordinary Renditions*, at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London in 2017. The exhibition marked the first major public presentation of her collage practice.

⁶⁰ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 8 October 2024. This quote was subsequently confirmed and expanded upon in personal correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

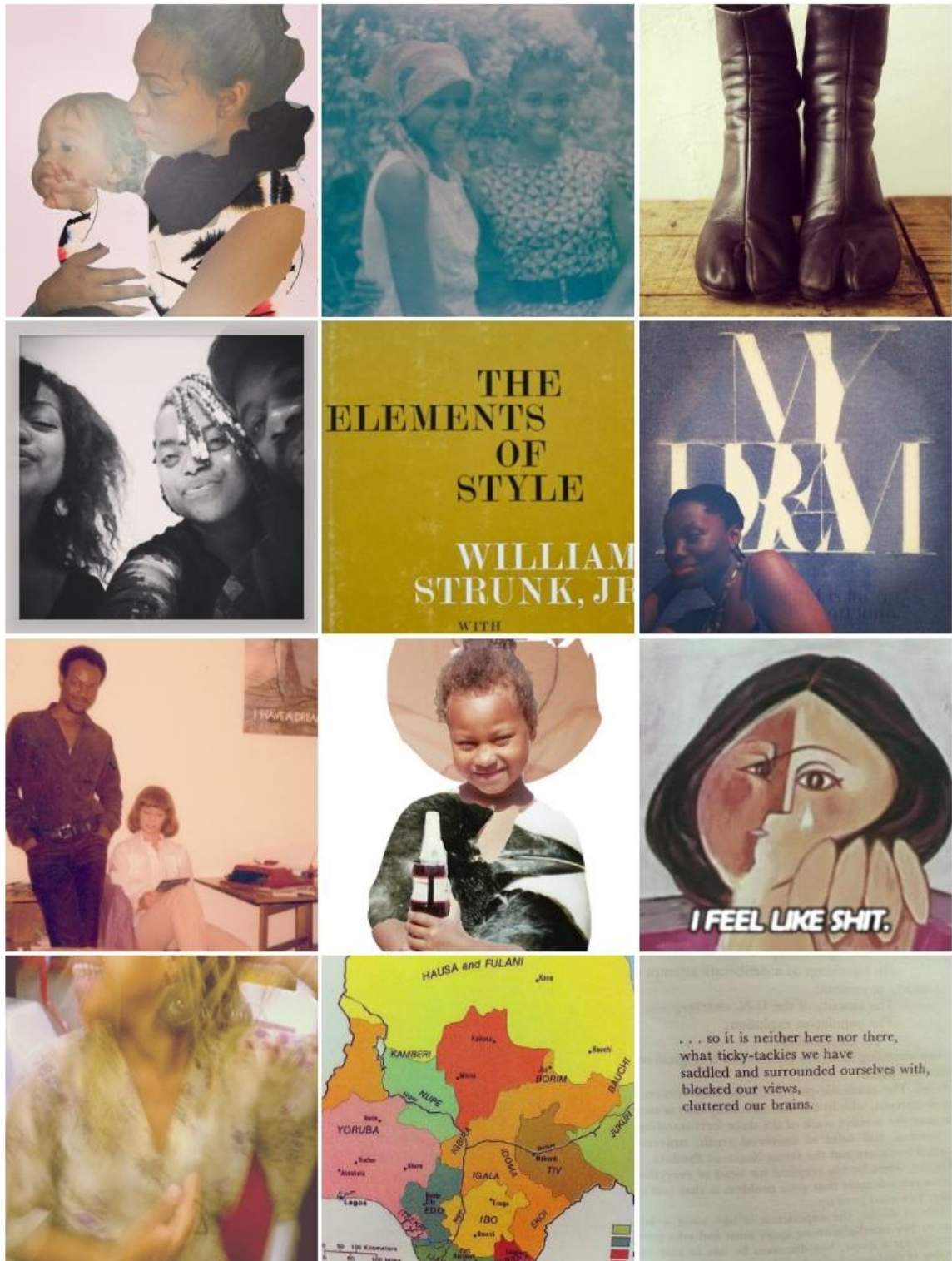


Figure 1: Screen shot of early Instagram posts by Frida Orupabo, posted under the username @nemiepeba.
Source: Frida Orupabo (@nemiepeba), Instagram, 2013.

It was only in the period leading up to the show at the Serpentine that Orupabo started to make her physical collages. Prompted by Jafa's encouragement to make material works, she began making collages after a full day's work as a social worker, often working through the night at home in Oslo.⁶¹ The images she had sourced for her Instagram feed now became the material she used in her paper collages.⁶² Orupabo's first exhibition at the Serpentine marked the beginning of a period of collaborating with Jafa. She later invited Jafa to present *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2019) in her first institutional exhibition at Kunstnernes Hus, *Medicine for a Nightmare*. That same year, Ralph Rugoff invited her to exhibit 7 collages and a video work at the 58th Venice Biennale Central Pavilion exhibition *May You Live in Interesting Times*.

Orupabo has later described how her employment at the Pro-center during this period was formative both for her independence as an artist —noting that when you have a full-time job “you don't have to produce in order to survive...there is a freedom in that”— and for her awareness of violence, gender, and racialized hierarchies —themes that permeate her collages. Her decision to continue to work from home is similarly motivated by a desire to maintain a degree of independence from what she perceives as the capitalist-driven art world. Orupabo describes her workspace, which also serves as a domestic space, as essential for keeping her grounded while navigating her dual roles as a mother and an artist. Importantly, her lack of formal art education further informs her artistic approach, as she views this absence as a positive factor; she suggests that had she undergone formal training, her artistic expression might have evolved differently.⁶³ Reflecting this position, she has remarked that she still prefers to think of herself as a “sociologist rather than as an artist.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ramm, “– I kunstverdenen er jeg en «nobody».”

⁶² For a sustained analyses of Orupabo's transition from Instagram practice to physical works see ⁶² Eivind Røssaak, “Kunstfeltets nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo,” in *Kunst som deling, delingens kunst*, 1. utgave., ed. Merete Jonvik et al. (Fagbokforlaget, 2020).

⁶³ Anie Olsen, “Frida (38) følte seg annerledes som barn – nå hylles kunsten hennes verden over,” Sarpborg Arbeiderblad, February 16, 2025, <https://www.sa.no/5-46-1774618>; *WIDE RAINBOW WORKSHOP: FRIDA ORUPABO*, directed by Wide Rainbow, 2022, 12:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnMXvJfcs6k>.

⁶⁴ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 8 October 2024.

2.1 Frida Orupabo and the Sourcing of Images

Orupabo has described her practice as a form of research, engaging questions of identity, postcolonialism, and decolonial thought — concerns that also shaped her studies in sociology. Her collages reflect these interests, gradually developing distinct thematic trajectories around issues such as racial science, sexuality, pregnancy, motherhood, and what she describes as “the treatment or mistreatment of the [black] body today and historically.”⁶⁵

The images she uses come from diverse digital platforms such as eBay, Tumblr, Google, online image banks, and film clips —platforms through which colonial-era photographs circulate widely, often detached from their original archival contexts.⁶⁶ While she has shared that the faces in her collages are predominantly drawn from what she consistently refers to as “the colonial archive,” she also incorporates other kinds of images, including contemporary material. When asked about her understanding of the colonial archive, Orupabo gave a broad definition:

For me, the colonial archives include all the images I find online that can be defined as having been taken during the colonial era. You can call them as many archives or as one big archive...I’m interested in photographs taken by white people of Black people; it is rare to encounter anything else from that era.⁶⁷

Her methods of collecting vary depending on the site: she saves images directly, or documents them by taking screenshots, photographs, or recording videos of her computer screen. In conversation, she emphasized that many image banks require that you pay for images, something she refuses to do, describing her use of such images as a way of “stealing back.”⁶⁸ In a later email, she elaborated:

⁶⁵ Frida Orupabo, “Hours After,” interview by Elvira Dyangani Ose, October 9, 2020, 7,10, Online conversation published by Stevenson gallery in the exhibition catalogue, <https://www.stevenson.info/sites/default/files/FOconversation%20.pdf>; Røssaak, “Kunstfeltets nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo,” 43.

⁶⁶ Alayo Akinkugbe, “Frida Orupabo, the Artist Reconfiguring Colonial Legacies Through Collage,” *Art & Photography, AnOther*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/14850/frida-orupabo-the-artist-addressing-colonial-legacies-through-collage>.

⁶⁷ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, October 24, 2024. This definition was subsequently confirmed and elucidated in personal correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

⁶⁸ Maya Binyam, “Stealing It Back: A Conversation with Frida Orupabo,” *At Work, The Paris Review*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2022/04/25/stealing-it-back-a-conversation-with-frida-orupabo/>; Røssaak, “Kunstfeltets nye instagrammatikk: Om Frida Orupabo,” 43.

A large part of the colonial archive I use is watermarked —owned by private individuals and institutions. I often keep the watermark to ask questions about what it means to own and profit from the colonial archive and whether this can be said to be a continuation of domination and exploitation.⁶⁹

As a result, she often incorporates watermarked photographs taken in the context of colonialism into her collages, leaving the watermark visible even when working with fragments of the image.⁷⁰

Although her practice started out on Instagram, she now describes her use of the platform as a kind of “sketchpad,” a place to test images and remain in dialogue with others. As her audience grew, however, she found the platform too exposed for this kind of experimentation and became wary of censorship. In conversation, she pointed to this as one of the reasons for no longer posting under the handle @nemiepeba. Her last series of posts dates to September 2023. She has since moved to a private account, where Instagram continues to function as a working sketchbook and a place for research, rather than a public site of display and dialogue.⁷¹

Over the past decade, Orupabo’s work has been presented in major European and international institutions, including solo exhibitions at the Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2025), in relation to her being awarded SPECTRUM Internationalis Preis for Photography, and the Astrup Fearnley Museum (2025), Oslo, Museu Afro Brasil, São Paulo (2021) and Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo (2019). She has also participated in major international exhibitions including 15th Gwangju Biennial (2024), the 34th São Paulo Biennial (2021), as well as the 58th Venice Biennale (2018). Her work is held in public collections such as; Tate Britain (London), Guggenheim Museum (New York), and the National Museum of Norway (Oslo), situating her within the global contemporary art circuit.

⁶⁹ Frida Orupabo, Personal communication to author dated 26.02.2026. This quote was subsequently confirmed and elucidated in personal correspondence to the author 26.02.2026.

⁷⁰ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 8 October 2024. In the same conversation Orupabo remarked that she generally does not keep track of metadata linked to her sources. She explained that this both interferes with the flow of her artistic process and reflects the fact that many of the images she works with are already decontextualized, with the little metadata available often focused on the photographer rather than on the subject.

⁷¹ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, October 8, 2024. This was subsequently confirmed in personal correspondence to the author 26.02.2026.

3.0 Visual Histories of Fragmentation and Control

This chapter examines how visual regimes of science and colonialism transformed bodies into specimens. By tracing these practices, I highlight the ways in which a particular mode of vision was mobilized as a tool of classification and control, and how later aesthetic practices fractured this epistemic order. Through the techniques of fragmentation and montage, from Berlin Dada to the Black Audio Film Collective, the chapter explores how ‘cutting’ becomes both an aesthetic strategy and an ethical act. By situating these visual practices within their epistemic, archival, and visual contexts, this chapter provides a framework for understanding Orupabo’s later reworking of such archival visual material can be understood.

The visual practices in this chapter emerge from, and contribute to, a historically specific conception of vision that took shape in the Enlightenment.⁷² Central to this epistemic formation was a rationalized, distanced, and objectifying gaze that treated visibility as a pathway to knowledge and classification. Rather than addressing “vision” in general, the following sections therefore examine how a particular mode of Enlightenment vision consolidated itself across scientific illustration, comparative anatomy, early photography, and the colonial archive. This genealogy clarifies the epistemic ground upon which demands for transparency and legibility were built. It also prepares the ground for the theoretical critique developed in the following chapter. In that chapter, Enlightenment vision is understood, by scholars such as Nicole Simek and J. Michael Dash, as a target against which Glissant articulates the “right to opacity.”⁷³

3.1 The transformation from Body to Specimen —Exhibiting and Dissecting the Racialized body.

In 1815, Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, a 25-year-old Khoisan woman from South Africa, died after years of being exhibited on stage and in cages in London and Paris under the derogatory

⁷² It is important to note that this account refers to a specific strand of Enlightenment rationality. The Enlightenment was not a unified intellectual movement but a heterogeneous field containing competing ideas of reason, experience, and vision. My focus here is on those Enlightenment formations that privileged rationalization, detachment, and the measurability of the world, conceptions of vision that became deeply entangled with emerging scientific and colonial epistemologies. These are forms of Enlightenment vision that the Chapter 4 will critically examine through the lens of opacity.

⁷³ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

colonial epithet “Hottentot Venus.” While she was widely recognized in her lifetime, her enduring legacy as a symbol of Black female sexuality stems from the sheer abundance and variety of visual representations made of her. In England, Baartman’s image appeared in satirical prints and even on a deck of playing cards, where her figure was exaggerated and distorted to reinforce racialized stereotypes. Beyond her public display as a so-called human curiosity, Baartman became the subject of scientific study in France, where renowned comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) commissioned artists such as J.-B. Berré, Léon de Wailly, and Nicolas Huet le Jeune to produce anatomical studies of her. These investigations sought to establish the “truth” of her supposed deviant sexuality, and, by extension, provide proof of her racial inferiority.⁷⁴ These investigations reveal an underlying assumption that the perceived inferiority of the racial Other was thought to be discernible through their anatomy.⁷⁵

This emerging belief on anatomy as the locus of racial truth must be understood within a broader epistemological shift in which, as philosopher Michel De Certeau has observed, modernity converted “the seen body” into “the known body,” producing intelligibility through corporeal inscription and classification.⁷⁶ Within this epistemological framework, culture and literary historian Sander Gilman notes, the anatomical studies of Baartman and other so-called “Hottentot women” followed a visual and ideological logic that pathologized racial difference. Such representations of the racialized body, he observes, synthesized the “perception of the uniformity of the groups into a convincingly homogenous image.”⁷⁷ Through this process, racial difference was naturalized. Similarly, at the level of the individual, Gilman notes, “[w]hen a specimen was to be preserved for an anatomical museum more often than not the specimen was seen as a pathological summary of the entire individual.”⁷⁸ Baartman’s genitalia and buttocks thus came to function as synecdochal

⁷⁴ Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, “Introduction: The Notion of Venus,” in *Black Venus 2010*, ed. Deborah Willis, They Called Her “Hottentot” (Temple University Press, 2010), 6, <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uio.no/stable/j.ctt14bt8mv.5>; Alison E. Wright, “The Hottentot Venus: An Alternative Iconography,” *The British Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (2013): 63; Lisa Gail Collins and Carla Williams, “Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth,” in *Black Venus 2010*, ed. Deborah Willis, They Called Her “Hottentot” (Temple University Press, 2010), 72, <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uio.no/stable/j.ctt14bt8mv.11>.

⁷⁵ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 57; Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, with Tom Conley (Columbia University Press, 1988), 3.

⁷⁶ Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 3.

⁷⁷ S. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late 19th-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* (United States) 12 (1985): 204, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448327>.

⁷⁸ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 216.

representations of her perceived racial and sexual essence. Gilman captures the logic of this anatomical discourse succinctly: if the sexual parts of Black women could be shown to differ from those of Europeans, this would, he writes, be taken as proof that “the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan.”⁷⁹ Such anatomical descriptions exemplify how scientific illustration transformed racial and sexual difference into visual evidence, rendering hierarchy as fact through the display of the body. Produced and circulated as empirical evidence, these anatomical images further show how visual representation made racial difference appear legible and supposedly objective fact.

After her death, Baartman’s body remained subject to scientific scrutiny. In an attempt to uncover and reveal the “truth” of what he regarded as Baartman’s «deviant» sexuality, George Cuvier⁸⁰ dissected her body, removing her brain and sexual organs, which were subsequently preserved in glass jars for study. A plaster cast of her body was made and put on display along with her skeleton as an ethnological specimen, complete with anatomical label and a title, at the *Musée de l’Homme* in Paris, where it remained on display until 1974. Audiences who had once paid to see her body in life were later invited to examine her remains through scientific display.⁸¹ Following a request from President Nelson Mandela, Baartman’s remains were repatriated to South Africa in 2002.⁸²

The institutional display of Saartjie Baartman, like other racialized individuals, is, as Gilman observes, intricately connected to the scientific desire to access the interior spaces of the female body.⁸³ George Cuvier’s invasive investigations extended comparative anatomy beyond the surface of the skin, where the scientific gaze had once halted. Cuvier’s investigations reflect broader scientific efforts to locate race within the body’s interior. In doing so, race was redefined as a characteristic that was more than skin deep and that also

⁷⁹ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 216.

⁸⁰ Baglo on Cuvier: “Cuvier regarded individuals as expressions or specimens of morphologically stable and fundamentally different types.” Cathrine Baglo, “From Universal Homogeneity to Essential Heterogeneity: On the Visual Construction of ‘the Lappish Race,’” *Acta Borealia* 18, no. 2 (2001): 23–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08003830108580524>.

⁸¹ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 213.

⁸² Robyn Wiegman, *American anatomies: theorizing race and gender*, New Americanism (Duke University Press Books, 1995), 58–59; Sadiya Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” *History of Science* 42, no. 2 (2004): 233, <https://doi.org/10.1177/007327530404200204>; Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 209.

⁸³ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies”; Marsha Meskimmon, “Corporeal Theory with/in Practice: Christine Borland’s Winter Garden,” *Art History* 26, no. 3 (2003): 446, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0141-6790.2003.02603007.x>; Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 30–31.

encompassed behavioral and cognitive expectations.⁸⁴ This development coincided with a broader scientific shift towards uncovering interiority and asserting interiority as a locus of “truth.” As Corinna Wagner observes, “The rise of anatomy in medicine brought about a reimagining of the relationship between the body’s exterior and its internal structures, along with a wider reconfiguring of surface and depth.”⁸⁵ Through these anatomical pursuits, the human body’s interior was made visible and integrated into a wider visual (or ocular) economy where it served to bolster ideas about racial difference.⁸⁶

The practice of displaying racialized individuals in so-called freak shows, museum exhibits, early cinema, and ethnological photography formed a central component of the burgeoning visual culture of the late nineteenth century. These practices extended the logic of spectacle that structured Baartman’s display, transforming racial difference into a visual commodity for both scientific and popular audiences.⁸⁷ During this period, the purported mechanical objectivity of the camera began to overtake artistic anatomical representation in recording the perceived “fact” of human variation.⁸⁸ Through the claim of neutrality, the camera lent empirical authority to the visual construction of racial hierarchies that had previously circulated across intersecting domains of art, science, and spectacle. I will return to a discussion of how photography was weaponized as an empirical tool for marking and ordering difference in Section 3.1.5.

3.1.2 From the Anatomized Body to the Epistemology of Vision

The practices of display and classification discussed above did not emerge in isolation but were shaped by broader epistemological shifts in how knowledge was organized and made visible. Michel Foucault traces these foundations, identifying a shift away from premodern systems of resemblance toward modern frameworks of comparison and classification.⁸⁹ In *The Order of Things*, he describes how “marks of identity and difference” became

⁸⁴ Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 30; David Theo Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE: PHILOSOPHY AND THE POLITICS OF MEANING,” in *Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993. X+313 Pp* (1993), 50.

⁸⁵ Corinna Wagner, “Replicating Venus: Art, Anatomy, Wax Models, and Automata,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, no. 24 (May 2017): 2, 24, <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.783>.

⁸⁶ Wagner, “Replicating Venus,” 2; Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xiii.

⁸⁷ Willis and Williams, “Introduction,” 6; Wright, “The Hottentot Venus,” 63; Collins and Williams, “Historic Retrievals,” 72.

⁸⁸ For an in-depth discussion of this shift, see Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity.”

⁸⁹ Although Foucault discusses the Classical episteme as a unified historical formation, my concern here is not to treat the Enlightenment as a monolithic intellectual formation. I draw on Foucault’s account to trace the emergence of a particular rationalist mode of vision.

“principles whereby things can be reduced to order, keys for a taxonomy,” grounded in “the apparent simplicity of a *description of the visible*.”⁹⁰ Where premodern thought sought kinship and analogy by “drawing things together,” Foucault argues that knowledge instead increasingly relied on a comparative logic grounded in “comparison” and what he terms “discrimination,” in which “marks of identity and difference” served as the foundation for ordering phenomena.⁹¹

This shift also reshaped vision itself as a mode of knowledge, producing what later thinkers would describe as a rationalized, disembodied mode of seeing. Drawing on Foucault’s argument, Robyn Wiegman, author of *American Anatomies*, argues that the classical episteme inaugurated what she terms “rationalized vision,” a mode of seeing grounded in detachment. In this account, the observer’s eye is imagined as disembodied and objective, a “feat of emotional withdrawal and bodily repression.”⁹² This disavowal of the body, she notes, was central to the methodological basis for natural history’s comparative framework, where difference was rendered legible as visible variation, and race became an “epiphenomenon of skin.” That is, difference read off the epidermal surface yet grounded presumed interior essence. As Wiegman notes, the comparative logic of natural history cannot be understood as ideologically neutral. Even when early naturalists denied hierarchy in favor of variation, their reliance on visual comparison and the assumption of a European norm revealed what Wiegman describes as “more complicated and contradictory positions about the origin and meaning of race.”⁹³ By rendering difference visible and measurable, this rationalized vision helped lay the conceptual groundwork for the hierarchical taxonomies that would later organize human bodies within now discredited scientific discourses and a colonial framework.⁹⁴

Following Foucault and Wiegman, this rationalized gaze —disembodied and detached— situates this visual rationality within a genealogy that extends into later Enlightenment developments, such as Cartesian perspectivalism. Édouard Glissant’s call for “the right to opacity,” as I discuss in Chapter 4, challenges this visual-epistemic framework by refusing

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, World of Man (Routledge, 1989), 61, 64, 149.

⁹¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 61-64, 149.

⁹² Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 25–27.

⁹³ Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 28.

⁹⁴ Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 26.

the presumption that the Other can be made fully knowable, comparable, or visible.⁹⁵ This resistance resonates with themes I return to in my later discussion of Lévinas, including his critique of vision as mastery and his notion of the caress, which together inform a non-mastering, relational approach to the gaze.

3.1.3 The Scientific Gaze

This epistemic shift redefined the parameters of knowledge and created the conditions for the hierarchical, racialized, and gendered objectification of bodies. As critical race theorist and philosopher David T. Goldberg explains in *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, the emergence of what he terms the “scientific gaze” was instrumental in this process:

The neutrality and objectifying distanciation of the rational scientist created the theoretical space for a view to develop subjectless bodies. Once objectified, these bodies could be analyzed, categorized, classified, and ordered with the cold gaze of *scientific distance*.⁹⁶

Goldberg’s analysis highlights how the scientific gaze, through observation, classification, and categorization, rendered human bodies as objects of study rather than subjects for relation. “Classification”, he suggests, operates as the “scientific extension of the epistemological drive” —that is, the modern will to transparency— to order and systematize phenomena, presenting this organization as reflecting a natural hierarchy. Detached and dispassionate, the scientific gaze claimed neutrality while casting the subject and object of vision into an observer/observed dialectic marked by asymmetrical relations of power. In doing so, it reconfigured bodies as analyzable objects, displacing subjectivity in service of classificatory abstraction.⁹⁷

The dynamics of abstraction and dehumanization that Goldberg describes find a powerful theoretical articulation, and radicalization, in the work of literary and cultural theorist Hortense Spillers. Spillers’ notion of “laboratory prose” clarifies how this dynamic operates by translating the “anatomical specifications of rupture” and “altered human tissue” into an

⁹⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

⁹⁶ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 50 (my italic).

⁹⁷ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 49–50.

objective, scientific register.⁹⁸ This clinical discourse abstracts the subject, by converting physical suffering into a descriptive object. Her central distinction between “body” and “flesh” further illuminates the violence of abstraction, in which the “body” is recognized as a legal and social subject, while a subject reduced to “flesh” represents “zero degree of social conceptualization.” Through this process, the captive body becomes a “territory of cultural and political maneuver” no longer “gender-specific.”⁹⁹ Exposed, vulnerable, and marked by violence, the body is rendered a mere “thing.” Tracing a legacy that continues to structure modern representations of “flesh.”¹⁰⁰

If Spillers exposes how scientific discourse abstracts and objectifies the racialized body, George Yancy emphasizes how this dynamic is sustained visually through what he describes as the colonial gaze. From this epistemic perspective, Yancy observes, the colonial gaze was able to “discern the truth of certain bodies only by relying on categories produced by a white racist regime of truth.”¹⁰¹ In his account, the gaze and the categories reinforced one another, sustaining the very hierarchies they purported to reveal.¹⁰² In this context, physical differences were mobilized as signs of intellectual or cultural inferiority and these perceived “truths” functioned to dehumanize racialized Others, justify colonial exploitation, and sustain domination.¹⁰³ What such visual representations convey, then, is less about the individual depicted and more about how the white subject perceived itself in relation to its racialized counterpart: Stripped of individuality and reduced to specimens, these individuals were inscribed within “social conditions of racialized violation and violence.”¹⁰⁴ This reconfiguration reflects the instrumental rationality characteristic of certain strands of

⁹⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

⁹⁹ I return to this in Section 7.4.

¹⁰⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>; Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Sending Language into Battle: Interview with Hortense J. Spillers,” *Boundary 2* 51, no. 1 (2024): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-10887499>.

¹⁰¹ As Yancy writes: “The European gaze was able to discern with ‘clarity’ and ‘accuracy’ the ‘truth’ about certain human bodies vis-à-vis a white racist regime of truth. The gaze reinforced the truth of the racist categories, and the racist categories reinforced the gaze. With regard to the white gaze, it was predicated upon fictive ‘race’ categories that were believed to designate empirical differences.” George Yancy, “Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as ‘Other,’” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (2008): 2.

¹⁰² Yancy uses the terms “European gaze,” “colonial gaze,” and “white gaze” (as well as variations like “white colonialist gaze”) interchangeably to refer to what he defines as a “broadly construed epistemic perspective” a manifestation of what he describes as an overarching “hegemony of vision in Western modernity.” George Yancy, “Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as ‘Other,’” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (2008)

¹⁰³ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 49–50; Yancy, “Colonial Gazing.”

¹⁰⁴ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 49.

Enlightenment thought, where vision became a means of ordering and governing the Other.

¹⁰⁵ As Goldberg further observes, modernity's conception of subjectivity was grounded in abstraction rather than relation:

a Subject that is abstract and atomistic, general and universal, divorced from the contingencies of historicity as it is from the particularities of social and political relations and identities. ¹⁰⁶

Goldberg argues that this universal Subject, defined by reason and grounded in its claim to impartiality, serves as the vantage point from which modern systems of knowledge — including, but not limited to, the emerging sciences of observation and classification — are constituted. ¹⁰⁷ Yet, as Goldberg goes on to argue, the universalism of this subject is sustained by its opposite: the particularity of race. Race, he notes, emerges as a key means through which modernity grounds its abstract ideals in material and historical form, gaining authority through scientific and social discourses that claimed to render difference intelligible. As Goldberg describes it, race, as an “almost conceptually empty” category, is broad enough to appear universal while remaining specific enough to enforce boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, determining who may embody universality and who remains its Other. ¹⁰⁸

This section has traced how Enlightenment rationality produced the scientific gaze, a gaze that defined knowledge through abstraction, positing the observer as disembodied and the racialized body as objectified matter. This account does not suggest a uniform or linear development but rather traces overlapping and historically unevenly distributed practices through which visibility, classification, and racialization became mutually reinforcing. In the following sections, I discuss how the gaze becomes operative in visual form: first through the protocols of the scientific image, and subsequently in photography's integration into systems of measurement and archive.

3.1.4 The Scientific Image

In *Objectivity*, Loraine Daston and Peter Galison analyze how scientific visualization practices, such as those embodied in what they term “atlas images,” not only depict the object

¹⁰⁵ I return to Édouard Glissant's critique of such instrumentalization in Chapter 4, which frames opacity as a refusal of these structures of legibility.

¹⁰⁶ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 4.

¹⁰⁷ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 4.

¹⁰⁸ Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 4; David Theo Goldberg, “Modernity, Race, and Morality,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 24 (1993): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354133>.

of study, but also *shape how it is seen*.¹⁰⁹ Drawing on a range of historical examples, including the composite photographs of British anthropometrist and father of eugenics Sir Francis Galton, Daston and Galison argue that these images “train the eye” to recognize certain types of objects and “regard them in a certain way”.¹¹⁰ Abstraction thus became embedded in image-making itself. Atlas images, they contend, possess a habituating force: they teach viewers “how to see the essential and overlook the incidental, which objects are typical, and which are anomalous”.¹¹¹ In this way, they cultivate a visual sensibility oriented toward universals rather than particulars, producing a “mind’s eye” that is trained to see patterns and *types*. Applied to human difference, this mode of visualization encouraged the eye to register individuals as fitting into constructed racial categories.¹¹² Although Daston and Galison’s analysis centers on atlas images, their argument that such images exert a habituating force —shaping both what and how we see —can be extended to a broader section of images and objects developed for, or drawing on, scientific visualization practices.

This belief in the image’s capacity to record without interpretation and serve as a transparent interface between the world and its observer, would come to define photography’s scientific applications in the nineteenth century. The photographic medium produced images that were seen as neutral imprints of reality, what Daston and Galison describe as “untainted by subjectivity,” an assumption central to the nineteenth-century ideal of mechanical objectivity.¹¹³ As Sekula notes, “[p]hotography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact...independent of human practice.”¹¹⁴ This assumption of mechanical neutrality linked the epistemic ideal of the scientific image to the photographic practices that sought to render human difference visible and measurable.

¹⁰⁹ I am aware that Daston and Galison argue that the scientific gaze is trained to align with evolving standards of scientific representations. However, some key characteristics such as detachment and indifference seem to be pervasive over time. Lorraine Daston and Peter L. Galison, *Objectivity* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 248–49, 261.

¹¹⁰ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations*, no. 40 (1992): 21, 85, 137–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928741>.

¹¹¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 22–23.

¹¹² Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” 137–38.

¹¹³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 32.

¹¹⁴ Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (1978): 862.

3.1.5 Photography and Race

As photography developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was increasingly weaponized as an empirical tool for marking and categorizing difference. One of the most influential figures in this development was anthropometrist Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), founder of eugenics, who in 1876 presented his method of producing “composite portraits” to the *Anthropological Institute of London*. Framing illustration practices as imprecise and subjective, Galton advanced photography as a more exact means of rendering type. The aim of the composite process was to identify and visualize the physical features shared within a given group. To achieve this, Galton successively exposed a number of quarter-length photographic portraits of individuals associated with particular social categories onto a single plate, dividing the exposure time across the number of faces.¹¹⁵ But the imaginative power even of the highest artists is far from precise, and is so apt to be biassed by special cases that may have struck their fancies, that no two artists agree in any of their typical forms.

He described the composites as “pictorial statistics,” visual forms that, in his view, condensed the material of many individual portraits into a single generalization. Physical similarities shared among the group were sharply defined, while differences emerged as an indistinct blur—a blur that, Galton argued, “measure[s] the tendency of the components to deviate from the common type.”¹¹⁶ Galton maintained that the blur was largely confined to the outline of the figure. As Allan Sekula observes in “The Body and the Archive”, this move exposed a tension between the empirical claims of the composite and its generalizing drive toward type. To preserve the authority of the image, Sekula argues, Galton relegated idiosyncratic traits to the margins—both figuratively and by description—effectively effacing variation while presenting the blurred image as a visual analogue of statistical law.¹¹⁷ The resulting composites were described by Galton as representing “no man in particular”, but rather an “imaginary figure,” a physiognomic type, embodying the group’s shared characteristics.¹¹⁸ Galton’s work aligns with ethnography practices of his time, where visual representations were used to produce race as visualizable fact.¹¹⁹ As Sekula observes, Galton claimed that the composites could “infer larger generalities from the small sample that made up the

¹¹⁵ Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” 138; Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778312>.

¹¹⁶ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (Macmillan and co, 1883), 342-343.

¹¹⁷ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 47-48.

¹¹⁸ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 340.

¹¹⁹ Wiegman, *American anatomies*, 24-25; Wagner, “Replicating Venus,” 2; Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies.”

composite.”¹²⁰ He further notes that “Galton argued that his composites refuted nominalist approaches to the human sciences, demonstrating with certainty the reality of distinct racial types.” “This amounted to,” argues Sekula, “an essentialist physical anthropology of race.”¹²¹

Galton’s approach, as described by Daston and Galison, exemplifies the nineteenth century ethics of “mechanical objectivity,” that is, “to shift as much interpretation as possible from the artistic-interpretive to the routine-mechanical is central to objective depiction as a regulative ideal.”¹²² As Sekula observes, Galton used this “naturalizing” evidence, to propos[e] a general quantitative hierarchy of intelligence, and [apply it] to racial groups.¹²³ Sekula characterizes this ideological practice as “biopositivism”: the intersection of biological determinism, positivistic science, and photographic and visual technologies aimed at managing populations. This logic encourages the propagation of the fit, and deters propagation of what they saw as undesirable traits, thereby justifying the treatment of certain populations as inferior.¹²⁴

This concern with population management, first articulated in his 1869 *Hereditary Genius*, was further developed in 1883 when Galton coined the word “eugenics” in a footnote of his book *Inquiries into human faculties and its development*. Here he writes that “the word eugenics would sufficiently express the idea of giving “the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had”.¹²⁵ Here, Galton takes up his previously expressed idea of doing “[w]hat nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.”¹²⁶

Photography, under this framework, was enlisted to bolster pseudoscientific categories, reinforce racist stereotypes, and conflate physical appearance with moral or intellectual qualities. These claims would later legitimize racial hierarchies and colonial domination. The idea of controlling reproduction along racial lines was not without precedent. In slaveholding countries, such as the United States, the control over Black women’s wombs had already

¹²⁰ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 47.

¹²¹ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 51.

¹²² Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 138.

¹²³ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 44,46.

¹²⁴ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 19, 46.

¹²⁵ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 24–25.

¹²⁶ Francis Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims” 1,” in *Scientific and Medical Knowledge Production, 1796-1918* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 294.

been central to sustaining slavery and foreshadowed later practices of enforced sterilization.

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3.1.6 Sekula: Photography, Archive, and the Truth-Apparatus

Sekula situates Galton's work within what he terms the double system of photography, characterized by "honorific" and "repressive" functions. He argues that the development of photographic portraiture followed a binary logic: the objectifying agenda of an instrumental "realist" mode, derived from scientific illustrations, defined against the celebratory presentation, "honorific" representation, of the "bourgeois *self*". As he notes, "every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police," functioning within a "shadow archive" where the body becomes categorized and surveilled.¹²⁸ Linking photography to power, Sekula further identifies what he calls the "arresting function" of the photographic image, a term describing its capacity to fix the subject both physically and symbolically. This function is most clearly exemplified in the frontal view, which, he argues, was central "to the process of defining and regulating" the subject.¹²⁹ As Sekula writes in *The traffic of photographs*:

The social-scientistic appropriation of photography led to a genre I would call *instrumental realism*, representational projects devoted to new techniques of social diagnosis and control, to the systematic naming, categorization, and isolation of an otherness thought to be determined by biology and manifested through the "language" of the body itself.¹³⁰

For Sekula, this repressive system of classification was integrally connected to global power structures. As he notes in an earlier article, the drive for visual documentation extended to colonial ventures, such as the Egyptian expedition, where photography offered a "seemingly neutral, mathematical objectivism" to manage the artifacts from the colonized East.¹³¹ This was made possible, as Sekula points out, through the linking of photography to a "truth-apparatus:" the modern bureaucratic institutions of the police and prison systems. In this context, "the camera [was] integrated into a larger ensemble: a bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of 'intelligence.'" Furthermore, Sekula argues, "[t]his system can be described as a sophisticated form of the archive. The central artifact of this system is not the

¹²⁷ Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 2nd Vintage Books ed. (Vintage Books, 2017), 86–88.

¹²⁸ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 6–10.

¹²⁹ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 6, 45–47.

¹³⁰ Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/776511>.

¹³¹ Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 17.

camera but the filing cabinet.” As he argues, these “truth-apparatuses” integrated photography into broader systems of documentation and control.¹³² Within these systems, photographs functioned not only to record but to classify, monitor, and regulate populations often in ways that stabilized existing social or racial hierarchies. In doing so, they produced and reinforced divisions between self and other. Buttressed by seemingly objective visual evidence, these categories took on the authority of natural facts and served to naturalize social inequalities.

Sekula argues that the authority of photography was grounded in its indexical claim to truth, a claim founded in Charles Sanders Pierce’s semiotic distinction that “[t]o the extent that photographs are ‘effects of the radiations from the object’, they are indexical signs.”¹³³ This indexical truth, Sekula continues, echoed W. H. F. Talbot’s early description of photography as offering a “legalistic truth,” which Talbot defined as “the truth of the indexical rather than textual inventory.”¹³⁴ In this conception, the photographic image was understood as a physically derived evidentiary trace capable of delivering “mute testimony.” This view of photography was grounded in a belief in its capacity to record without interpretation.¹³⁵ In Sekula’s account, photography’s repressive function thus served, in effect, as an instrument of science, derived, as he notes, “not from any honorific portrait tradition, but from the imperatives of medical and anatomical illustration.”¹³⁶ Through this alignment, photography’s repressive function, he argues, “came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the generalized look —the typology—and contingent instance of deviance and social pathology.”¹³⁷

It was within this context that Galton developed his method of producing composite images. Presented as an objective technique designed to map physical differences across races and classes, the method also served to affirm hierarchies of value that underpinned contemporary racial and colonial thought. The photographic image, as Sekula reminds us, is never an unmediated imprint of the world but is always embedded within the specific institutional and epistemic frameworks.¹³⁸ Within what he terms the “shadow archive,” photography became a

¹³² Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 16.

¹³³ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 55.

¹³⁴ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 6.

¹³⁵ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 6.

¹³⁶ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 7.

¹³⁷ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 7.

¹³⁸ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 16.

means through which individuals were identified and categorized according to institutional needs and biases. It is in this context Sekula reflects on the status of the Galtonian composites. In retrospect, he writes,

the Galtonian composite can be seen as the collapsed version of the archive. In this blurred configuration, the archive attempts to exist as a potent single image, and the single image attempts to achieve the authority of the archive, of the general, abstract proposition.¹³⁹

As Sekula suggests, the Galtonian composites visualize the interplay between the singular and the systematic. By condensing a field of photographic records into a single representation, the composite enacts the archive's ambition to produce generalized knowledge through individual bodies, thereby transforming an inferential accumulation of images into the appearance of a universal type. Conversely, Sekula argues, by superimposing multiple photographic records onto a single plate, the composite attempts to assert the "authority of the archive" by presenting itself as a visual synthesis of the "general, abstract proposition".¹⁴⁰ In this way, Galton's composite image visually exemplifies the archive's claim to scientific and epistemic authority. Sekula's account of photography's integration into bureaucratic systems exposes the intimate link between the photographic image and administration. The truth-apparatus he describes did not remain confined to European institutions but was exported, refined, and expanded through imperial networks of governance. It is within this broader context that the colonial archive emerges as the global infrastructure of modern visual order. I return to this framework in Section 7.1, where it informs my analysis "The Collective Portrait."

3.1.7 The colonial archive: Ordering Vision and the Governance of Difference

As David Theo Goldberg writes, "at the heart of modernity lies its concern with order," expressed as a will to "rational transparency" that sought to replace "opacity and obscurity" with the light of precision and definition.¹⁴¹ This ideal of transparency, articulated in the scientific and philosophical projects of modernity, found its most extensive realization in the colonial archive. He further argues that, by the late nineteenth century, classificatory logics had become embedded in imperial administration, where distinctions between "ruling" and

¹³⁹ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 54.

¹⁴⁰ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 45, 54.

¹⁴¹ Goldberg, "RACIST CULTURE," 4–6.

“subject” races were treated as self-evident truths of governance.¹⁴² Within this context, Goldberg argues that, “[r]acial ordering, racist institutional arrangement and racial control were key instruments of colonial governmentality and control” sustained by “colonial outlooks, interests, dispositions and arrangements.”¹⁴³ Although historically and geographically variable, these outlooks circulated across imperial contexts as shared frameworks. They structured what colonial authorities considered possible, shaping how populations were governed and administered. He further argues that this involved:

exploiting and governing, admitting and administering those conceived as racially distinct and different —and relatedly for elevating and privileging those deemed racially to belong to the dominant.¹⁴⁴

The colonial archive’s classificatory impulse found a potent visual instrument in photography.¹⁴⁵ As Sekula observes, with the emergence of the modern social sciences, “a regularized flow of symbolic and material power is engineered between fully-human subject and less-than-fully human object along vectors of race, sex, and class.”¹⁴⁶ Through these same practices, Sekula observes, early anthropological photography sought to link “optical empiricism” —the belief that photographic image provides objective visual data— with abstract systems of classification.¹⁴⁷

Nineteenth-century positivism reduced anthropological difference to a quantitative, rather than qualitative, matter where “inferiority could presumably be measured and located on a continuous calibrated scale.”¹⁴⁸ This shift rendered difference not only measurable but visible as such. As Sekula explains, “[a]rmed with calipers, scalpel, and camera, scientists sought to prove the absence of a governing intellect in criminals, the insane, women, workers, and nonwhite people”.¹⁴⁹ In this way, photography was as Sekula argues, “hitched to the locomotive of positivism”, visually enacting the epistemic will to order racialized bodies

¹⁴² Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 5–6.

¹⁴³ David Theo Goldberg, “Racial Comparisons, Relational Racisms: Some Thoughts on Method,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 7 (2009): 1275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870902999233>.

¹⁴⁴ Goldberg, “Racial Comparisons, Relational Racisms,” 1273.

¹⁴⁵ Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 17.

¹⁴⁶ Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 16.

¹⁴⁷ The deployment of photographic realism, Sekula notes, was constitutively linked to the colonial condition. From its inception, photography was framed by proponents like François Arago in terms of colonial acquisition, anticipating its use in expeditions to acquire “faithful pictorial records” of sites like Egypt and establishing a “seemingly neutral, mathematical objectivism” toward the colonized East. See Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 17.

¹⁴⁸ Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 18.

¹⁴⁹ Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 18.

described by Goldberg.¹⁵⁰ As Goldberg observes, racial conceptions varied over time and place; “[w]ho counts as ‘black’ and who ‘white’ differs from one place to another, as too do specific meanings attached to the designations and their placements.”¹⁵¹ As anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler notes, “[c]olonial administrations were prolific producers of social categories,” yet these “[g]rids of intelligibility were fashioned from uncertain knowledge”. She emphasizes that the archives did more than document pre-existing distinctions; they actively “developed” and recalibrated them. This was done “most clearly,” argues Stoler, “when assigned attributes fell short of differentiating the gradations of exclusions and exemptions that new colonial administrations sought to make.” Colonial documentation actively produced and regulated difference by translating uncertainty into the appearance of coherence or what colonial administrators took to be essence.¹⁵² This ‘blurred’ epistemic vision, which sought to stabilize ambiguity through acts of differentiation, was central to the visual and bureaucratic techniques that defined colonial modernity. As Stoler, Sekula, and Goldberg argue, the colonial archive actively produced categories of difference through bureaucratic and visual practices that worked to classify and regulate racialized bodies.

3.1.8 The Desire to Measure and the Desire to Look

This drive toward classification also reconfigured the very conditions of seeing, tethering vision to regimes of measurement. As Sekula observes, in his discussion of Galton’s writing, this reasoning demonstrates “a remarkable parallelism and tension between the desire to measure and the desire to look.”¹⁵³ This tension encapsulates a central aspect of scientific vision: the impulse to make the visible measurable and to visualize what can be measured. I understand this fusion of measurement and vision as a defining operation of the scientific gaze, in which observation and calculation co-constitute one another. In this collapse of looking into abstraction, the body becomes not a presence to encounter but a datum to process. This shift transforms the act seeing into a mode of knowledge production, as we saw epitomized in Galton’s composites, which he describes as a “pictorial statistics.”¹⁵⁴ This

¹⁵⁰ Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 16.

¹⁵¹ Goldberg, “Racial Comparisons, Relational Racisms,” 1275.

¹⁵² Ann Laura Stoler, “Prologue in Two Parts,” in *Along the Archival Grain*, Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense (Princeton University Press, 2009), 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rtrg.5>.

¹⁵³ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 44.

¹⁵⁴ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 47–48.

mode of looking forms the ground against which I will later articulate an alternative mode of vision in Section 6.0.

3.2 Fragmentation as Aesthetic and Epistemic rupture

Having traced how the scientific and colonial gaze transformed bodies into specimens and consolidated vision as a tool of classification and control, I now turn to the emergence of collage and photomontage. These aesthetic practices fracture the appearance of coherence and unity that define traditional aesthetic objects.¹⁵⁵ While Dada photomontage was not a direct response to the scientific image, it operated within the same epistemic milieu. It mobilized fragmentation, primarily realized through photomontage and collage, as a key aesthetic principle. In doing so, it disrupted the perceived coherence and stability of this bourgeois rational order. Within this context, Hannah Höch's practice, particularly her series *From an Ethnographic Museum*, extends this critique toward the visual structures of colonial and ethnographic display. Deeply rooted in Dadaist principles and methods, even though the series extended past the movement's conventional timeline, the series uses cutting as a means of interrogating representation and the construction of difference itself.¹⁵⁶

3.2.1 Defining the photomontage

The term collage derives from the French *coller*, "to paste," which in true originates from the Greek *kolla*, meaning "glue." and refers broadly to techniques of pasting heterogeneous materials onto a flat rectilinear surface.¹⁵⁷ The more specific *papier collé* describes the gluing of paper and is most often used when referring to the Cubists.

Georges Braque is often credited with the invention of the *papier collé* as an artistic innovation. In a series of charcoal drawings, he incorporated imitation wood-grain wallpaper. Of these, *Fruit Dish and Glass* (1912) are believed to be the first in this series. That same year, Pablo Picasso created what is generally considered the first artistic collage, *Still Life*

¹⁵⁵ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Theory and History of Literature (University Press, 1984), 4:74.

¹⁵⁶ I return to Höch's a practice in Section 3.2.3.

¹⁵⁷ Douglas Harper. "Collage." Online Etymology Dictionary. Accessed March 11, 2025.
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/collage>

With Chair Caning (1912). By introducing manufactured materials, such as rope, to the pictorial field, Picasso presented fragments of reality directly onto the canvas, rather than representing them metaphorically or mimetically. As Peter Bürger, in his 1974 book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* notes of the early Cubist collages, although there is undoubtedly an “element of provocation” in the gluing of “reality fragments” onto the canvas, these fragments “remain largely subordinate to the aesthetic composition.” The intent, in these first Cubist collages, he argues, was still “to create an aesthetic object.” While they involved a destruction of the organic work that portrayed reality, the integrity of art itself was not, argues Bürger, called into question.¹⁵⁸ Bürger, following Aragon, argues that for the Cubists the inclusion of stuck elements was for its *material qualities* rather than a total shaping of the pictorial space as continuum.¹⁵⁹ The Dada photomontage, as we will see in the next section, differed in subject matter, material choice, technique, and relationship to technology and society.

Although photomontage developed out of the Cubist drive toward aesthetic fragmentation and discontinuity, its orientation in the hands of the Dadaists (and later the Surrealists) shifted from formal experimentation to cultural critique and psychological exploration. Around 1923, Constructivist artists also adopted the technique, characterized by the use of geometric form and spatial construction. They employed it as a vehicle for social engagement and revolutionary propaganda. Rejecting bourgeois aesthetic values, the Dadaists embraced an anti-art stance in which photomontage erupted as a leftist political weapon, provoked by the trauma of war and the failed revolution of 1918-1919.¹⁶⁰ As Timothy O. Benson notes in his book *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*, the Dadaists sought to develop a new artistic language that could reflect and expose the surrounding “cultural situation”: “What the Dadaists referred to as the *Klebebild* [glued picture] and the *Plastik* [sculpture] were to them the logical place to begin the formation of a new language and myth.”¹⁶¹

George Grosz, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and Raul Hausmann—all members of the Berlin Dada movement—present differing accounts and claims regarding the invention of photomontage. Despite disagreements over who actually invented the artistic form of

¹⁵⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 4:74.

¹⁵⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 4:65.

¹⁶⁰ Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, World of Art (Thames and Hudson, 1997), 116; Brigid Doherty, “‘See: “We Are All Neurasthenics”!’ Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 82–132, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448868>; Timothy O. Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada* (hannahann, 1987), 2–4.

¹⁶¹ Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*, 109.

photomontage during the summer of 1918 Timothy Benson notes that it, “did not reach its full application until 1920. Prior to this, photographs were rarely incorporated in these initial 1918 “Klebebild”.¹⁶² The technique itself can be traced back to mid-nineteenth-century composite photography, when photographs were manipulated to create imaginative scenes or overcome the technical limitations of the photographic medium. Yet, as Dawn Ades observes in her seminal book *Photomontages*, the artistic form of the photomontage was invented “within the context of , but also in the opposition to, [the] collage” and differs on key points. The photograph —with its unique relation to reality, provided, according to Ades, a way to move beyond abstraction without returning to figuration. At the same time, she notes that photomontage turned the medium against itself. It distorted reality through the very means that had been seen “as its truest mirror”.¹⁶³ In photomontages, Ades explains, photographs, or fragments of photographs, became the *primary structural element* of the composition.¹⁶⁴ Whereas the Cubists incorporated found objects —what Bürger described as “reality fragments” —from outside the realm of art, the Dadaists used industrially reproduced photographic representations of objects, not the objects themselves. Hannah Höch’s reflections on the technique illuminate the implications of this shift toward mechanical reproduction. The main concept behind the photomontage, Höch remarked, was to “integrate objects from the world of machines and industry into the world of art.”¹⁶⁵ Ades understands Höch’s statement as pertaining to both the material employed in the photomontage and to its iconography, situating the medium within the visual culture of technological modernity.¹⁶⁶ Photomontage not only incorporated the visual productions of technological modernity but also reflected upon the processes of mechanical reproduction that structured modern perception. Boswell *et al* note that the term photomontage as derived from the German *montieren*, meaning “to assemble» or «to fit», and was used by the Berlin Dadaists to “describe their process of piecing together of photographic and typographic sources, usually cut from the printed mass media.”¹⁶⁷ There has never been full consensus over the definition of the photomontage. One view, associated with curator William Stanley Rubin in the exhibition catalog “Dada, Surrealism and its heritage” (Museum of Modern Art in 1968),

¹⁶² Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*, 81.

¹⁶³ Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, Rev. and enl. ed., World of Art (Thames and Hudson, 1986), 15,19.

¹⁶⁴ Ades, *Photomontage*, 12–13.

¹⁶⁵ Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (Allen Lane, 1968), 218.

¹⁶⁶ Ades, *Photomontage*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Peter W. Boswell et al., *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (Walker Art Center, Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996), 2.

emphasizes the *technique* of cutting and reassembling of photographs. A contrasting position, articulated by Sergei Tretyakov in 1936 in his writing on John Heartfield, takes a markedly different approach. For Tretyakov, a photomontage “need not necessarily be a montage of photos”; it can also combine photography with text, color, or drawing. For Ades drawing on Tretyakov, photomontage is not defined by technical process but by “the operation that transforms the meaning of the original photograph.”¹⁶⁸ Tretyakov’s position, reflected in Heartfield’s politically charged works, framed photomontage as a dialectical operation that alters how photographs signify within social and political contexts. Ades, on the other hand, ultimately adopts a broader position, defining photomontage as occurring “when the imagery itself is predominantly photographic, whether collaged or rephotographed, rather than according to technique.”¹⁶⁹ This debate over definition finds its counterpart in the Dadists’ own conception of their work. Raul Hausmann, a central figures of the Berlin Dada, described their use of the term “photomontage” as a deliberate renunciation of the traditional artist’s role:¹⁷⁰

We called this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the part of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we *assembled* [in French: *monter*] our work, like a fitter.¹⁷¹

3.2.2 Fragmented form

Hausmann’s conception of Dadaist practice as a form of construction is echoed in the formal strategy of fragmentation and reassembly. As Ades notes, Dada’s “chosen enemy was Expressionism,” whose “inwardness and Utopianism” the movement rejected. In its first manifesto, Huelsenbeck called for an art with a “conscious content” that engaged with the “problems of the day,” and adopted a fragmented aesthetic mirroring the violence and upheaval of their contemporary post-war moment —an art that was, in his words “visibly

¹⁶⁸ Ades, *Photomontage*, 15–17, 19.

¹⁶⁹ Ades, *Photomontage*, 17,

¹⁷⁰ Hausmann’s statement that the Berlin Dadaists regarded themselves as engineers rather than artists resonates with Frida Orupabo account, who similarly resists identifying herself as an artist, preferring, instead, to think of herself as a sociologist. See Chapter 2.

¹⁷¹ As quoted in Richter, *Dada*, 118.

shattered.”¹⁷² In retrospect, the photomontage, Ades observes, is perhaps the medium that comes closest to Huelsenbeck’s ideal.¹⁷³

The Dadaists’ turn to photomontage translated social and psychic rupture into subversive visual disjunction, into what Ades describes as “a chaotic, explosive image, a provocative dismembering of reality.”¹⁷⁴ Through the juxtaposition of disparate fragments the Belin Dada constituted the photomontage as a site of formal collision. Here, fragmentation itself became a mode of critique and a way of shocking the viewer into a perception of a new reality; socially, politically, psychologically, as well as aesthetically.¹⁷⁵ Brigid Doherty ties the photomontages capacity to shock the viewer to the formal structure of the medium itself.

The capacity to induce trauma inheres specifically in the *form* of photomontage, where the beholder's traumatic experience is, so to speak, already embodied in the composite image of a figure whose parts do not match-where, to put it another way, traumatic shock is made visible in a fragmented body..¹⁷⁶

3.2.3 Hannah Höch’s *From the Ethnographic Museum*

In the years following the Dada period, the term *photomontage* came to denote a more restricted practice. As Boswell *et al* note:

Subsequent to the Dada period, the term photomontage has often come to have a more restricted meaning: a seamless, composite image achieved either by manipulating negatives in the dark room or rephotographing a collage of photographs, techniques favored by such disparate artists as John Heartfield and the Russian Constructivists, on the one hand, and the Surrealists, on the other. Höch never engaged in such photographic artifice (other than in an occasional double-exposure self-portrait), preferring to accept the evidence of hand cutting over the creation of seamless illusion or the mass-production of images.¹⁷⁷

This emphasis on visible construction defined, as we will see, Höch’s contribution to Dada photomontage and shaped the direction of her later work. Born in 1889, Hannah Höch became involved in Berlin’s art scene during the height of World War I and Expressionism. She arrived in the city in 1911, from Thüring to study the applied arts, training in embroidery,

¹⁷² Ades, *Photomontage*, 24; Brigid Doherty, ““See: “We Are All Neurasthenics”!’ Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448868>; Andrés Mario Zervigón, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 71.

¹⁷³ Dawn Ades, *Dawn Ades: Writings on Art and Anti-Art*, ed. Doro Globus (Ridinghouse, 2015), 43; Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*, 4–5.

¹⁷⁴ Ades, *Dawn Ades*, 36.

¹⁷⁵ For a sustained discussion of photomontage’s affective and agitational force, see Andrés Mario Zervigón, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁷⁶ Doherty, ““See,” 84.

¹⁷⁷ Boswell et al., *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, 2.

textiles, and the design of wallpaper. A few months after the outbreak of the war, in April 1915, Höch met the Czech artist Raoul Hausmann, who introduced her to the avant-garde community surrounding Herwarth Walden and his renowned *Der Sturm* gallery which was the central gathering place for Expressionist artists and writers in Berlin. At the time, Höch was studying in Emil Orlik's graphic arts class at the *Kunstgewerbemuseum* and had obtained a part-time position at the Ullstein publishing house, a post she would hold for a decade. Working within a major publishing network placed her in close contact with photographic material—sources that she would draw on extensively from 1918 onward.¹⁷⁸ During this period, a subsidiary of Ullstein published *Der Querschnitt*, a periodical that, as art historian Maria Makela notes, served as a key visual source for Höch's later *From the Ethnographic Museum* series, created during the gradual dispersal of the Dada artists in the early 1920s.¹⁷⁹

Created between 1925 and 1931, the seventeen small-sized photomontages that make up *From an Ethnographic Museum* features photographic fragments of non-European sculpture and predominantly female body parts, spliced together in unsettling combinations. Makela situates Höch's work within the broader colonial imaginary of the de facto post-colonial Weimer Republic, arguing that by reworking ethnographic and popular imagery through photomontage Höch transforms the visual conventions of colonial display into objects of critique. Through this, Makela positions Höch as a counterpoint to many of her Expressionist contemporaries, who adapted non-European art for their own artistic renewal. Makela observes that Höch's strategy of silhouetting the figures against rectilinear backgrounds and placing them as if on pedestals, echoes the taxonomic displays found in Berlin's ethnographic museums, exposing how non-European bodies were categorized, aestheticized, and ultimately denied active function."¹⁸⁰

While Makela's analysis foregrounds Höch's formal engagement with the structures of ethnographic display, Denise Toussaint approaches the same series from a different theoretical standpoint, arguing that Höch interrogates the ideological foundations of colonial representation itself. Höch's engagement, she argues, reflects a critical awareness of the ideological structures underlying representation. This, she argues, is an approach that, in

¹⁷⁸ Kristin Makholm, "Strange Beauty: Hannah Höch and the Photomontage," *MoMA*, no. 24 (1997): 19; Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*, 28, 112.

¹⁷⁹ Maria Makela, "From an Ethnographic Museum: Race and Ethnography In 1920s Germany," in *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, ed. Peter W. Boswell et al. (Walker Art Center, Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996), 70.

¹⁸⁰ Makela, "From an Ethnographic Museum: Race and Ethnography In 1920s Germany," 71–72.

retrospect, resonates with postcolonial discourse.¹⁸¹ Toussaint's analysis turns to the visual articulation of these concerns within the photomontages themselves, where she argues that Höch "depicts the construct of difference and, therefore, that of Self and Other, in the most direct way by incorporating these images into her work."¹⁸² This, she argues, is clearly realized through the depiction of racialized skin:

Höch transfers the emphasis on skin colours, which is typical of the media's representation of difference, into her work. She consistently combines her chosen clippings directly and focuses on the collision between white skin and black skin.....Putting her figures together, Höch creates harsh disharmonies that are often only seen at second glance; in the process she destroys the hierarchy of skin colours by treating them equally.¹⁸³

The construct of difference and identity, and the historical violence enacted through this construction, Toussaint argues, is materially staged through Höch's rejection of the seamless surface. Instead, she leaves the "cuts and edges" visible, emphasizing "boundaries and dividing lines; disruption; contrast; fragmentation [and] inconsistency."¹⁸⁴ By cutting out images from mass media, Höch, enacts what Toussaint describes as a process of "decontextualisation in the most material kind of way." Through the physical act of "cutting and gluing, she argues that Höch "replicates the photographer's subjective intervention", which transforms a subject into an object of scrutiny. Höch completes this process, argues Toussaint, by "cutting out the pictures" for her work.¹⁸⁵ Toussaint argues, Höch uses the act of cutting and gluing as a deliberate methodological and political strategy. This strategy exposes and dismantles the representational systems and ideological constructs of Self and Other in the postcolonial context of the Weimar Republic.¹⁸⁶

In her discussion of the work *The Sweet One* (1926), Toussaint further develops this argument by considering how Höch's figures unsettle the very act of viewing. She argues that the hybrid, fractured figure —where the coquettish posture of elegant white women is juxtaposed with the black body of a so-called "primitive" primitive sculpture —refuses objecthood, "show[ing] off viewing habits as much as it agitates them."¹⁸⁷ Toussaint writes:

¹⁸¹ Denise Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation: The Photomontages of Hannah Höch," *De Arte* 51, no. 1 (2016): 25–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043389.2016.1176377>.

¹⁸² Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 33.

¹⁸³ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 30.

¹⁸⁴ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 33.

¹⁸⁵ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 32.

¹⁸⁶ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 33.

¹⁸⁷ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 30.

Höch reflects on typical practices of representation in the mass media, ethnographic museums, anthropological displays and variety shows, and scrutinises their influence in the early twentieth century: '[...] primitives were made available for visual inspection by millions of strolling and staring western citizens' (Corbey 1993:338). Höch's figure represents the being that is 'made available', as well as the 'strolling and staring' it endures by the viewer.¹⁸⁸

Furthermore, Toussaint notes how the figure's "penetrating look" redirects vision back toward the viewer, transforming the scene of observation into one of mutual exposure.¹⁸⁹ This discussion of the visual order anticipates later practices that reconfigures the gaze and unsettle the very act of viewing.

3.3 Black Audio Film Collective and the colonial archive

The aesthetic ruptures initiated by Dadaists revealed how fragmentation could serve as a tool of critique to expose the ideological assumptions embedded in photographic visual representation. Decades later, in 1982, the seven-person Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) reactivated this aesthetic of fragmentation within a radically different historical and political context: that of Britain's colonial aftermath.¹⁹⁰ Their essayistic films turn to the archive to dismantle the colonial image from within, interrogating how its formal and affective structures continue to shape perception.¹⁹¹ In an interview with Kobena Mercer BAFC members John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison describe how the Collective defined its aesthetic path by making conscious rejections, including what they term as the "outright rejection of the Afrocentric position."¹⁹² This was necessary, they argue, because the "black art" language inherited from the United States, "valorized a blues aesthetic or a jazz language," which was not suited to the British context.¹⁹³ The Collective, Akomfrah notes, also saw its "interest in the colonial archive" as an "open revolt against the icon-loving fondness for American Black Panther imagery" found in the UK black art movement. While

¹⁸⁸ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 32.

¹⁸⁹ Toussaint, "Dismantling Colonial Representation," 32.

¹⁹⁰ Kobena Mercer, "Becoming Black Audio: An Interview with John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison," *Black Camera* 6, no. 2 (2015): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.6.2.79>.

¹⁹¹ John Akomfrah, "Black Independent Filmmaking: A Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, 1983," *Black Camera* 13, no. 1 (2021): 435–37.

¹⁹² Mercer, "Becoming Black Audio," 90.

¹⁹³ Mercer, "Becoming Black Audio," 80.

they describe feeling an affinity to the radical forms of artists like Sonia Boyce¹⁹⁴, they also argue that the “rhetoric” of the BLK Art Group was disconnected from the reality of “here” in Britain.¹⁹⁵

Drawing on the cinematic and sonic avant-garde as well as the textual practices of Aimé Césaire and William Burroughs, BAFC developed what John Akomfrah describes as a “recycling aesthetic” that merged montage with decolonial critique. Whereas the Dada-photomontage drew on mass-media imagery, the BAFC turned to official archival material combining it with newly shot footage to, in Akomfrah’s words, “comment on the past” in order to move forward.¹⁹⁶ This approach is articulated most clearly in “Black Independent Filmmaking: A Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, 1983” which forms the conceptual foundation for the Collective’s practice.¹⁹⁷

The core mission and methodology outlined in the BAFC statement, as articulated by Akomfrah, strongly relies on a critical engagement with, and deep analysis of, pre-existing cinematic and cultural images. The Collective aimed to expose how cinematic language itself is used to construct and maintain certain ideas about race and ethnicity. Their concern was not with replacing negative stereotypes with positive, or what they describe as “authentic” images, but with moving beyond substitution. Their objective was at once both theoretical and structural: to analyze existing films and uncover the complex ways in which they encode ideas about “race, nationality, and ethnicity.”¹⁹⁸

We not only want to examine how black culture is misrepresented in film, but also how its apparent transparency is a “realism” in film. It is an attempt to isolate and render intelligible the images and statements which converge to represent black culture in cinema. The search is not for “the authentic image,” but for an understanding of the diverse codes and strategies of representation.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ This study traces artistic and critical genealogy from the Dada photomontage, through Hannah Höch, to the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), as a framework for understanding Orupabo’s later reworking of such material. The BAFC is included within this lineage due to its explicit engagement with the colonial archive, its “recycling aesthetic,” centered on fragmentation and the “cut-up” methodology. This focus on the avant-garde’s structural and critical principles necessarily leaves aside other genealogies of montage and collage —such as those exemplified by Sonia Boyce’s photo-based works which remain highly significant and merit future scholarly investigation.

¹⁹⁵ Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio,” 90.

¹⁹⁶ Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio,” 86.

¹⁹⁷ Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio”; Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio.”

¹⁹⁸ Akomfrah, “Black Independent Filmmaking,” 436.

¹⁹⁹ Akomfrah, “Black Independent Filmmaking,” 436.

By describing the image as *apparently* transparent and linking this to realism, Akomfrah is pointing to how the image comes to seem natural, objective, and unquestionable, thereby masking the ideological structure that secures its apparent neutrality. This constructed transparency is precisely what the Collective sought to interrogate. The BAFC stated that their aim was to develop an understanding of the “diverse codes and strategies of representation” that make certain images appear “self-evident.” Their work placed particular emphasis on technical and formal strategies, breaking down “self-evident truths” and “codes and strategies of representation” in existing cinematic forms.²⁰⁰

As Mercer observes, the Collective’s hybrid practice of intercultural cinema was anticipated in the group’s first production, based Aimé Césaire’s poem “Notes of a Return to My Native Land” (1939–42). Akomfrah describes their approach as “Burroughsian,” editing the poem to “exaggerat[e] the fragmentary quality” and to create an “interesting collision.”²⁰¹ This early multimedia performance used what Akomfrah describes as a “tape-slide” technique in which 35mm images were layered with echoing, reverberant sound, and projected onto angled muslin, creating a fractured, unstable visual field. As Akomfrah observes, three of the group’s members, Eddie George, Claire Joseph, and himself, appeared on stage. Standing between the muslin and the lighting rig, their bodies silhouetted and intersected the projected visuals.²⁰² Here, the cut functions both as a method and metaphor: by splicing and reassembling Césaire’s poem, the Collective enacted a decolonial montage that prefigured their later cinematic practice.

As art historian Kobena Mercer writes in *Travel and See*, the BAFC’s cinematic mode of inquiry into Britain’s postcolonial condition was formed through cutting and montage, resisting a synthesis of history and memory, foregrounding instead “gaps, absences” and “contradictions.” Their films, he argues, open “a space of poetic reflection” that interrogates official histories through personal archives, creating a space where gaps and absences become sites of reflection.²⁰³ As Mercer explains:

BAFC’S mode of inquiry opens a space of poetic reflection in which the limitations of all of cinema’s available representational systems are put into question. Instead of a synthesis of memory and history, the collective’s films underscore an irreconcilable agonism, for gaps, absences, distortions, fabrications, and contradictions arise on all sides: the forces of erasure, forgetting, and denial are as active in shaping family mythologies contained in

²⁰⁰ Akomfrah, “Black Independent Filmmaking,” 435–36.

²⁰¹ Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio,” 89.

²⁰² Mercer, “Becoming Black Audio,” 88.

²⁰³ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 228–29.

snapshots and home movies as they are in shaping national mythologies that are based on the selective filtering of the collective past.²⁰⁴

In conversation with Nina Power, John Akomfrah has discussed that the need for this form of interrogation stems from the fact that the archive either contains material that is ideologically skewed in its representation of racialized subjects or lacks documentation of their experience.²⁰⁵ Objecting to what he describes as a view of the archive as “innocent” —as though “somehow the truth resides in the archive, unsullied, unmediated” Akomfrah calls instead for a “critical interrogation of the archive.”²⁰⁶ By removing the “structuring devic[e]” or “narrative voice” from archival images, Akomfrah asserts, the images “start to say something else,” allowing new lines of inquiry to emerge. Explaining their way of approaching the archive, Akomfrah notes that what the BAFC in a sense is doing, is “reformulating the premise by which certain things exist and letting them function instead in erasure as what they always were, but also as something new.”²⁰⁷ This critical engagement with the colonial archive establishes a lineage of cutting practices that mobilize fragmentation, juxtaposition, and temporal disjunction to interrogate representation. Frida Orupabo returns to and extends this trajectory through the material and spatial disruptions of her collage practice. I return to this discussion in Section 6.4 and 6.5.

3.3.1 From Montage to Ethical Cut

Kobena Mercer’s reading of Black Audio Film Collective’s montage practices foregrounds cutting as both an aesthetic and epistemic act —a mode of inquiry that exposes the contradictions embedded in archival representation. Yet, as Asbjørn Grønstad suggests, drawing on media theorists Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska’s notion of *differential cutting*, the cut is not only formal; it alters the existing “fabric of the world” by opening onto otherness through its formal configurations.²⁰⁸ This formulation provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding cutting as both an aesthetic and ethical gesture. As Grønstad writes:

²⁰⁴ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 229.

²⁰⁵ Nina Power, “Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry: Interview with John Akomfrah,” *Film Quarterly* (Berkeley) 65, no. 2 (2011): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2011.65.2.59>.

²⁰⁶ Power, “Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry,” 62.

²⁰⁷ Power, “Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry,” 62.

²⁰⁸ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 6. I return to this discussion in Section 6.4.6 and 6.4.7.

In making a cut, images transform the existing fabric of the world, and the nature of this particular act is inevitably and inescapably ethical. While the practice of cutting is not mimetic in itself, the ethics it engenders still maintains a relation with the sphere of representation. This is because aesthetic works open themselves to alterity, the manifestations of which might be captured in a film's formal configurations.²⁰⁹

In this passage, Grønstad defines the ethical cut as an act that is “not mimetic” but remains tied to the “sphere of representation”.²¹⁰ In Grønstad's reading, ethics thus remains tied to the representational act: it arises through the film's formal and aesthetic reconfiguration of memory, where alterity is encountered within structures of representation itself —through an “affirmation of the values of uncertainty, openness, and opacity”²¹¹ Drawing on Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity, Grønstad integrates these values into his account of an ethical imagination in film as a way of safeguarding alterity within representation.²¹² In my reading of Grønstad, such values temper representation without dismantling it: they mark a shift from mastery to ethical exposure, yet remained grounded in the formal configuration of the image. Similarly, invoking Gayatri Spivak, Grønstad writes that;

radical otherness ‘must be thought through imaging’ but ethically responsible films do not ‘explain’ this otherness; rather, they defend its constitutive opacity. Here we find ourselves at the very center of this amorphous thing we call film ethics, the irreducibility of form and the irreducibility of subjectivity and personhood.²¹³

Grønstad further develops what he describes as an *ethics of form*, though one that remains grounded in representation. In his discussion of Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses*, among others, he identifies a “heterogeneous aesthetic matter to configure memory and its ethical spaces.” He notes that historical absences caused by “mechanisms of repression” are irrecoverable, yet these works “seem to acknowledge the epistemological implications of this substantial burden of representation.”²¹⁴ Here, ethics is situated within the act of representation itself, an engagement with the archive that reconfigures, but does not escape, its visual representation.

²⁰⁹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

²¹⁰ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

²¹¹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 8.

²¹² Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 236.

²¹³ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 236.

²¹⁴ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

4.0 Opacity: Aesthetic refusal and Ethical demand

In *Poetics of Relation* the late Martinican cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant critiques the rationalist epistemology of the Western Enlightenment, and its belief in universal truths and a world “as harmonious, homogeneous, and thoroughly knowable.”²¹⁵ It is precisely this rationalist conception of the world —defined by clarity, transparency, and epistemic mastery—that Glissant resists through what he calls the “demand for opacity.”²¹⁶ In *Un monde en relation* (2009), Glissant recalls asserting the “right to opacity” as early as 1969, during a congress at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. For Glissant, the imposition of Western transparency represents a fundamental injustice:

There’s a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparency and the projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? ²¹⁷

While Glissant’s critique addresses the epistemological and cultural impositions of rationalism, his intervention resonates with critiques of how vision itself was restructured under Enlightenment thought. According to David Michael Levin, a specific conception of vision, associated with the certitude of Descartes’ method, was embedded within the rationalist project. Levin argues that this gaze subordinated sight to the intellect and sought to organize the world according to universal principles. As he writes:

Descartes's vision is a vision grounded in, and disciplined by, the judgment of a universal rationality. It is an enlightened vision, humane and benevolent, certainly not a vision of prejudice, intolerance, and hatred. But.. there are some marked affinities with the authoritarian gaze, most notably in its unhappiness with ambiguity, its insistence on clarity and distinctness, its linearity, its need for fixation.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

²¹⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2; Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190 The French *opacité* is translated variously as “opacity” or “obscurity” in English editions of Glissant’s work. While both terms convey aspects of resistance to transparency and comprehension, “opacity” is retained here for consistency and to emphasize its conceptual rather linguistic valance.

²¹⁷ Édouard Glissant et al., “Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28, no. 1 (2011): 14.

²¹⁸ “Descartes Window,” in *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment*, Reprint 2019., by David Michael Levin (University of California Press, 1999), 45.

Building on this, Levin associates Cartesian vision with a structure of control that eliminates ambiguity and renders the visible world available for mastery. Levin further suggests, the object of vision becomes increasingly abstract — stripped of its singularity and rendered legible within a homogenizing system of representation.²¹⁹ Dalia Judovitz similarly emphasizes this tendency to intellectualize vision, when she writes that:

When the mind perceives, it does so in exclusion of sensation. It forms a clear and distinct idea of objects, by having reduced and abstracted their material character into an entity whose transparency is the result of the homology of the mind and the mathematical schematism that the mind imposes upon the world. Hence the experiential world recedes in its material opacity....²²⁰

She further explains how, in Cartesian thought, vision is no longer rooted in ocular perception but in intellect. Descartes, she writes, elaborates a “new kind of vision that the understanding rescues from the limitations of the gaze.”²²¹ This intellectual vision, Judovitz observes, attempts to transcend the “constraints of the visible” by translating vision into an abstract system.²²² In privileging deduction and “figurative reduction”, Cartesian vision, argues Judovitz, detaches seeing from the body, replacing the role of physical sensation with an abstract mental operation.²²³

As Glissant observes, the rationalist framing — grounded in the instrumentalization of optics and the doctrine of one-point perspective — first took shape on the canvas, where “the spectacle of Nature was supposedly something one could reproduce.”²²⁴ Glissant writes that, in the Western tradition, “knowledge and imitation set themselves up as mutual guarantors,” establishing a pictorial regime in which the world was made available to be known, ordered and possessed by the human subject.²²⁵ He situates this within a tradition in which painting is viewed as a “science,” whose aim was to dissect nature into clear and distinct components in order to reproduce it accurately. Within this logic, as Glissant describes it, visual representation does not merely depict the world, it claims to uncover an essential, universal truth beneath appearances.²²⁶ He elaborates:

²¹⁹ “Descartes Window,” 48–49.

²²⁰ Dalia Judovitz, “Vision in Descartes,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (University of California Press, 1993), 78.

²²¹ Dalia Judovitz, “Vision in Descartes,” 68.

²²² Dalia Judovitz, “Vision in Descartes,” 68.

²²³ Dalia Judovitz, “Vision in Descartes,” 68–70.

²²⁴ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

²²⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

²²⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

The idea of imitation presupposed that beneath the appearance of things, but basic to them, there lay the same "depth," some indubitable truth, led to primarily by the sciences and more closely represented in art, to the extent that these representations systematized their reproductions of reality and recognized the legitimacy of its aesthetic. Thus, the revolution in perspective in paintings from the beginnings of the Quattrocento was conceived of as moving toward this depth.²²⁷

Such a move, from the seen world to the measured world, forecloses opacity by demanding that differences be reduced to universal norms, stripped of its singularity, and made available to epistemic mastery.

The relationship between geometric measurement and representation is maybe most dramatically unfolded in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *A Draftsman Drawing a Nude* from 1527. (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer, Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman (1527) Woodcut on paper. 7,5 × 21,5 cm. From *Treatise on Perspective*, Nuremberg

The scene depicts a draftsman who views his subject, a partially clad and reclining female, through a grid placed in front of him on a table. The grid visually dissects and isolates the female body into discrete square entities allowing the draftsman to render her flesh into an abstract geometrical pattern. Vision here is increasingly detached from the experiential and sensuous world, becoming, instead, a mechanical operation that transforms bodies into measured, abstract forms. As Barbra Freedman argues, this mode of spectatorship entails a gendered logic: it emerges in the positioning of an active male voyeur and a passive female

²²⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

“object” on the table, where her body is regulated and contained by the controlling gaze of the male observer.²²⁸

Yet the implications of this visual regime extends beyond gendered asymmetry. The grid that enforces the separation between the observer and the observed is not merely an artistic device but participates in a broader rationalization of vision that would become foundational to modern regimes of knowledge.²²⁹ Embedded within this tradition is a conceptual shift whereby the body is no longer encountered as singular or sensuous but is abstracted into calculable form.

I describe this visual practice because it constitutes the precursor of Cartesian perspectivism: a gaze characterized by a disembodied and detached rationality, whose attitude would become influential of the rationalist stance of the Enlightenment thinkers Glissant critiques. As Levin and Judovitz each suggest, this gaze seeks clarity, order, scorns ambiguity, and rejects any encounter that might preserve opacity. As Mikko Lehtonen observes, this “non-participatory” and “coldly-abstract” gaze perceives the world from the outside, without acknowledging its positionality.²³⁰

²²⁸ Barbara Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 2. Freedman writes: “Since this famous woodcut documents the development of painter’s perspective, we usually identify with the artist’s point of view. In the process, however, we identify with the male as the appropriate bearer of the look, the female as the proper object of that look; we identify with reason against sexuality, activity over passivity, and seeing instead of showing. The scenes framed by the windows further encourage our identification with masculinity as culture against femininity as disorganized nature. The fullness of the potted tree framed by the artist’s window suggests a disorderly nature made fertile by the artist’s containing vision. In contrast to the strong vertical lines of the tree, the draftsman’s posture, and his viewing rod, the horizontal lines of the woman’s reclining body are reinforced by the low rolling hills seen through her window. These visual cues facilitate our identification with the painter and encourage the equation of right spectatorship with a controlling patriarchal perspective.”

²²⁹ Dürer’s methods allowed artists to use the principles of geometry to solve problems of perspective in art, however, his methods and his work on comparative and differential anthropometry in the 1528 book *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (*For books on human proportion*), would eventually inform the fields of physiognomy and even racial doctrine. Although Dürer, did not connect exterior features to inner characteristics, his work lay the foundation for the belief that mathematics could disclose the “hidden rules underlying *all* bodies.” As Noam Andrews writes: “Much like other contemporary Renaissance treatises that sought to analyze and categorize the human body, Dürer stressed that geometry was fundamental to defining well-ordered and proportional rules of appearance. But in moving beyond the pursuit and visualization of a singular and stable ideal proportion (for ‘no single man can be taken as a model for a perfect figure’) or moralistic critiques of ‘licentious’ proportions, *menschlicher Proportion* was unique in its evocative framework for mapping transformational relationships between body types and faces, and thus gave credence to the idea that mathematics could reveal the hidden rules underlying all bodies.” Noam Andrews, *Racial Profiling: Delineating the Renaissance Face*, February 15, 2023, 348–53, <https://doi.org/10.54027/BKIS6126>.

²³⁰ Mikko Lehtonen As quoted in Janne Seppänen, *The Power of the Gaze: An Introduction to Visual Literacy* (Peter Lang, 2006), 26.: “Cartesian perspectivism is characterized by its lonely eye, like the eye

By producing a distance between the sensing body and the object of perception, and by redefining vision as an operation of the intellect rather than the senses, Descartes transformed vision into what Judovitz describes as a “mechanical operation.”²³¹ Sight is no longer a direct relation, but an instrumentalized extension of the subject. In this model, the viewer does not simply see but projects, measures, and controls the object through a mediated and objectifying process. As David Michael Levin has argued, the rationalist gaze not only disavows ambiguity but also excludes affect, relationality, and vulnerability from the field of vision. In such a conception of vision, claims Levin, the Other is rendered containable and graspable, obscuring lived experience and otherness.²³² This reorganization of vision established a framework of legibility that extended beyond art into wider cultural practices, including early anthropometric photography under colonialism, laying the foundation for later visual regimes committed to transparency and classification.

4.1 Transparency as a tool of containment and control

Building on the rationalist conception of vision outlined above, the convergence of Enlightenment thought and colonial expansion, turned transparency a tool of containment and control. In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant critiques the Western Enlightenment’s epistemology, particularly its faith in universal transparency and a world imagined “as harmonious, homogeneous, and thoroughly knowable.”²³³ At the core of this project, he identifies an epistemological operation grounded in rationalism and in the mastery implied by understanding —“to grasp” [comprendre]” —which he links to a “fearsome, repressive meaning.”²³⁴

Glissant emphasizes that mastery is exercised not only through domination, but also through the very demand for comprehension. He describes this impulse as “the spirit of conquest and discovery.”²³⁵ Patrick Crowley underscores this historical function in his reading of Glissant,

of a Cyclops, which perceives reality outside of itself; It is immortalized, idealized, detached from the body, coldly abstract, a non-participatory gaze. Moreover, it is gaze that does not see itself. Being positioned outside the field of vision inhibits the seer from seeing him or herself as the producer of the scene”

²³¹ Dalia Judovitz, “Vision in Descartes,” 71.

²³² Levin critiques Descartes’ method for subordinating vision to disembodied reason and excluding affective and ethical dimensions of perception, arguing that such a gaze is blind to suffering and the complexity of lived experience. “Descartes Window,” 31, 37–38.

²³³ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77 .

²³⁴ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 26, 190.

²³⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 111.

arguing that Enlightenment reason, once absorbed into the colonial project, became not solely a philosophical project but “instrumentalized and pressed into the service of power.”²³⁶

Glissant suggests that this rationalist logic confined the Other within a colonial space of intelligibility, a framework that left no space for opacity or uncertainty.²³⁷ Instrumentalized by colonial power, Glissant describes how this epistemological logic sought to confine the Other within containable forms, casting the subject and the object of knowledge into a hierarchical relation of the knower and the known.²³⁸

If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.²³⁹

Glissant’s critique can be read as outlining how the Western imperative to transparency functions as an epistemic form of violence—a mode of relation in which the drive to render the Other legible or to grasp replaces encounter with possession. Violence, in this Glissantian sense, is embedded in the very demand for comprehension that reduces difference to what can be measured, compared and assimilated to hegemonic norms.²⁴⁰ For Glissant, the demand for transparency is already a demand for sameness; it reduces alterity to what can be comprehended and judged. Understood in this way, his critique exposes Western humanism as not ethically neutral: it is not open to otherness; but instead seeks confirmation of its own perspective.²⁴¹ He frames transparency as a requirement within Western thought that demands legibility and comparability, operating not only as a metaphor of full visibility, but

²³⁶ Patrick Crowley, “Édouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacité,” *Romance Studies* 24, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581506x120073> As Crowley writes: “diversity to ‘la fausse clarté de modèles universels’.”¹² The West, though understood as a project, can also be understood, specifically and historically, as colonial France which took overseas a version of Enlightenment thought that was instrumentalized and pressed into the service of power. The light of reason or, in Glissant’s view, the false light of universal models, informed, for example, the thinking of many ethnologists, cartographers, teachers, administrators and urban planners who sought to ‘understand’ the non-European.”

²³⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

²³⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 59, 179, 220.

²³⁹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁴⁰ As emphasized by in “Stubborn Shadows” by Nicole Simek, it is important to avoid treating opacity as an inherent property of the Other—a risk Nicole Simek notes when she warns against the sacralization of opacity that re-essentializes difference. Here, opacity emerges in relation rather than a cultural essence.

²⁴¹ Glissant writes: “Rather than seeing the truth of the world, western humanism was in fact gazing on itself [...] the transparency of the other thus amounts to a transparency for the self to the self—one which is, moreover, a false transparency..” Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 107.

as a process that, by demanding to “measure” the Other’s “solidity with the ideal scale,” enforces sameness.²⁴² As Glissant observes:

Rather than seeing the truth of the world, western humanism was in fact gazing on itself [...] the transparency of the other thus amounts to a transparency for the self to the self—one which is, moreover, a false transparency..²⁴³

According to Glissant, this gaze does not truly encounter the Other, but returns back to the Self, positioning the Other within a framework of comprehension and control. Within this logic, identity is structured through difference and the positing of an Other in relation to the Self. According to Adlai Murdoch’s reading of Glissant, this process of deciphering the Other results in modes of representation that flatten difference into images of singularity and homogeneity.²⁴⁴

Glissant describes this “requirement for transparency” as an imperative that reduces difference to what can be seen and known.²⁴⁵ He situates this demand for legibility within a broader colonial logic of conquest and domination, embedded in Enlightenment rationalism, which upheld transparency as both a condition for knowledge and foundation for sound governance.²⁴⁶ Nicole Simek points out that this ideal of transparency carries a double bind: While it promises accountability, social order, and the conditions for democracy, it simultaneously enables surveillance, containment, and epistemic control.²⁴⁷

4.2 Transparency and the Colonial Visual Regime

Professor of French Caribbean literature and thought Celia Britton, in her reading of Glissant, extends this critique by linking opacity to the visual regime that structured the relation between the “discoverer” and the “discovered”. According to her, Glissant defines colonial authority as being dependent not only on surveillance, but also on the visibility of the

²⁴² Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁴³ Glissant as quoted in Girim Jung, “Resisting Ontologization: An Intercultural Comparison of Glissant, Moten, and Suh,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 244, 1.

²⁴⁴ Adlai Murdoch, “Glissant’s Opacité and the De-Nationalization of Identity,” *The CLR James Journal* 18, no. 1 (2012): 23; Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 56.

²⁴⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁴⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 111.

²⁴⁷ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 364–65; On the Enlightenment genealogy of transparency, see: Clare Birchall, “Radical Transparency?,” *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* (Los Angeles, CA) 14, no. 1 (2014): 77–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613517442>.

colonizer — “the colonizers exercise their domination not only by seeing but by being seen, and by being seen as powerful.”²⁴⁸ In this framework, authority was not merely enforced through looking but was staged and reinforced through spectacle. If the colonizers’ power rested on making those in power visible to the people, the governors also sought to make the many visible to those in power. Transparency became, as Britton suggests, a means to control and shape the behavior of large groups of people through surveillance techniques and practices of knowing. According to Britton’s reading of Glissant, this enforced visibility, or transparency, does not only function on an epistemic level; it also produces affective effects —fear, exposure, and anxiety— ensuring that the “master’s gaze” was *felt* as well as seen.²⁴⁹ As Britton puts it, it was “the exaggerated ‘transparent’ *visibility*” of colonial authorities that provoked the enslaved or colonized subject’s desire for opacity. This was a desire that resists not only individual exposure, but the colonial logic of transparency itself: a logic that demands legibility as a condition for control. Put differently, the colonizers display of power calls forth opacity as a form of resistance.²⁵⁰

From a broader theoretical standpoint, Clare Birchall argues that “understanding appears as an act of aggression because it constructs the Other as an object of knowledge.” She points to what she describes as the often-imperceptible violence of transparency,²⁵¹ noting that it is;

.. an invisible discourse because its mediation is obscured by its status as a cultural signifier of neutrality. It is seen as not having a particular quality in and of itself but as, rather, merely the invisible medium through which content is brought to our attention, into the visible realm.²⁵²

This logic of precarious visibility —where being seen often entails being rendered knowable, and to be known is to risk subjugation — forms the backdrop against which Glissant formulates his demand for opacity, which he describes as both a strategy of resistance and a condition for an ethical encounter.²⁵³ As Britton interprets it, opacity can be understood as a

²⁴⁸ Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (University of Virginia Press, 1999), 21–22.

²⁴⁹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 21–23.

²⁵⁰ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 22 Britton is referring in part to the following quote from Caribbean Discourse “The only source of light ultimately was that of the transcendental presence of the Other, of his Visibility-colonizer or administrator—of his transparency fatally proposed as a model, because of which we have acquired a taste for obscurity, and for me the need to seek out [opacity]”.

²⁵¹ For a philosophical critique of visibility and light beyond the colonial context, see my discussion of Lévinas in chapter 5

²⁵² Birchall, “Radical Transparency?,” 81–82.

²⁵³ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189; Murdoch, “Glissant’s Opacité and the De-Nationalization of Identity,” 2012, 22–23.

form of resistance to the colonial gaze and its demand to fix the racial Other within recognizable and controllable forms. This resistance unsettles the epistemic violence of visibility—that is, the reduction of difference to legible and knowable forms—and opens the possibility of a relation that is not premised on mastery. She argues that opacity “confronts the stereotype’s attempt to fix racial difference with a self-representation that cannot be fixed because it is deliberately unintelligible.”²⁵⁴ Britton underlines that in this sense, opacity disrupts the scopic regime that stabilizes difference, producing “an *unintelligible* presence from within the visible presence of the colonized”.²⁵⁵ It becomes, in Britton’s words, an “active production of a visible but unreadable image”.²⁵⁶

This strategic refusal does not end the process of engagement; rather, it shifts the affective and cognitive burden of relation onto the interpreter. Simek notes that Glissant asserts that opacity is mutually entangled with interpretation, and that the presence of the unfathomable functions to, in Glissant’s words, “maintain an anxiety, vertigo.”²⁵⁷ For Professor of French Literature J. Michael Dash, in his reading of Glissant, the body, through which these affective shifts (anxiety, vertigo, loss of control) are generated, becomes a crucial site of interpretation and engagement. As Dash observes, this moment of “sensuous plenitude” occurs when “the self immersed in the world” realizes that “there can be no mastery of the world as all dualisms are abolished.”²⁵⁸ The anxiety and vertigo of the interpreter is not a cognitive challenge; it is a somatic and philosophical experience that marks the subversion of the Cartesian, logocentric Self, and the colonial demand for mastery, drawing the interpreter into a “sensuous relationship” with the world. Dash clarifies that the purpose of this affective shift is to redirect the interpreter’s mode of engagement away from the cerebral to the sensuous. It transforms the distanced and disembodied “gaze” (the colonial regime) into the conditions for a non-mastering, proximate “touch”: “shift[ing] our attention away from the gaze that objectifies and the false sense of total control toward a more sensuous and immersive relationship with the world.”²⁵⁹ Following Simek and Dash, opacity, therefore, is not a withdrawal into complete unknowability but a strategy that strategically “thwarts” the Western rationalist tendency toward reduction, compelling, instead, a sensuous, “open-

²⁵⁴ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24.

²⁵⁵ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 25.

²⁵⁶ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24.

²⁵⁷ Glissant as quoted Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

²⁵⁸ Glissant as quoted Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

²⁵⁹ J. Michael Dash, “Writing the Body: Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of Re-Membering,” *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (1989): 611, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40145552>.

ended” and non-mastering form of relation.²⁶⁰ The shift in knowledge systems is thus not grounded in cognition but linked to a bodily and affective reorientation of the perceiving subject. This shift concerns the viewer’s epistemic and perceptual orientation rather than opacity’s aesthetic operations, which I discuss later in the chapter.

4.3 Opacity

Building on this critique of visibility and transparency, Glissant’s concept of opacity redefines relation not as comprehension but as coexistence without mastery. As Britton notes, Glissant’s critique, is not directed at visibility itself, but at the unequal terms under which it is imposed, and the structure of reduction and domination it sustains.²⁶¹ What Glissant opposes according to Britton is “the inequality and lack of reciprocity of the relation.”²⁶² In contrast to what he defines as a colonial regime, in which visibility is paradoxically tethered to erasure or reduction, Glissant asserts “the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but substance within an irreducible singularity,” that is to say, a form of being that cannot be fully grasped or translated into common measure.²⁶³ This is not a withdrawal from relation but an ethical insistence on relation founded on a non-comparative form of difference. It refuses a notion of difference in which the Other is assessed according to the norms of the colonizer.²⁶⁴ As Glissant describes it, “to consent to opaqueness” is to consent to “the irreducible density of the other”.²⁶⁵ As Patrick Crowley points out, Glissant’s concept of opacity does not unfold as an anti-rationalist stance. Rather, it emerges as a “a medium that resists the light of (Western) understanding in order to preserve diversity and advance

²⁶⁰ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

²⁶¹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 23.

²⁶² Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 23.

²⁶³ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁶⁴ While Glissant’s notion of Opacity emerges from a context shaped by colonial violence, it is not confined to postcolonial resistance. Crowley notes that this is especially the case in Glissant’s later work and therefore cautions against appropriating it exclusively within that framework. (Crowley, “Édouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacité,” p107-108) While I engage opacity here in relation to colonial histories and decolonial critique, I remain attentive to how, in Glissant’s writing opacity exceeds these coordinates and gestures toward a more general resistance to reductive modes of knowing and being.

²⁶⁵ While Glissant’s critique of recognition and transparency may appear structurally similar to Lévinas’ ethical demand for openness toward the Other. It is grounded in fundamentally different ethical and political stakes. Glissant’s demand for the right to opacity is not an abstract ethical principle but a response to the colonial imposition of legibility as a mechanism of control. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 133.

exchanges based upon networks that abolish the primacy of any one center of understanding.”²⁶⁶ As Glissant writes:

To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" him in my image.²⁶⁷

Rather than a concept of difference premised on visibility and legibility, Glissant calls for the “thought of opacity [that] distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be.”²⁶⁸ As Glissant clarifies: “The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such.”²⁶⁹ Thus, his concept of opacity does not imply a denial of relation, but reconfigures it, thus challenging modes of relationality shaped by coloniality: “It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”²⁷⁰ Glissant articulates this reorientation of relationality in *Poetics of Relation*:

Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.²⁷¹

In this way, Glissant’s demand for “the right to Opacity”, is not an appeal for recognition, but a fundamental ethical reorientation: a refusal of full legibility as a condition for relation, and of the demand that difference resolve into representational coherence—that is, into stable and legible forms within a given representational order.²⁷² Instead, it calls for a mode of coexistence grounded in irreducibility and consent to not fully know the Other, whose singularity cannot be reduced to the terms of a dominant epistemic or representational

²⁶⁶ Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 107.

²⁶⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

²⁶⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

²⁶⁹ Glissant differentiates between the “opaque” and the “obscure.” He describes the “obscure” as a temporary veil that yielded to a “final underlying transparency” that aimed at “grasping” a core truth or essential identity. Opacity, conversely, is an “active strategy of resistance,” performed by the oppressed as an epistemic strategy employed as a response to Western rationalist thought. Opacity protects irreducible singularity and serves as an overarching ethical framework rooted in the respect for alterity. See Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 61-62, 189-190.

²⁷⁰ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

²⁷¹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 111.

²⁷² This refusal to strive for recognition on the oppressor’s terms is not a denial of subjectivity but a reclamation of it. As bell hooks similarly argues in “Yearning — race, gender and cultural politics” p 22: “Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy. We are not looking to that Other for recognition. We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner.” Like Glissant’s opacity, this is a politics of relation that refuses assimilation and demands self-determined meaning.

framework. Crucially for the subject at hand, Glissant observes that the demand for clearness, lucidity and definability extends beyond bodies and identities into the realm of cultural and artistic production:

Western thought has led us to believe that a work must always put itself constantly at our disposal, and I know a number of our folktales, the power of whose impact on their audience has nothing to do with the clarity of their meaning. It can happen that the work is not written for some-one, but to dismantle the complex mechanism of frustration and the infinite forms of oppression?²⁷³

Read in this light, opacity does not foreclose relation but reconfigures the terms under which relation becomes possible.

4.4 Ethics of Non-Mastery and the Right to Opacity

Building on the preceding discussion of Enlightenment ideals of lucidity and definability, this section turns to the ethical implications of Glissant's call for "the right to opacity."²⁷⁴ Glissant situates the epistemological legacy within the colonial project, where the demand for transparency extends beyond knowledge to govern how we relate to others, and how we relate to cultural and artistic production. Within this epistemic order, difference was not encountered on its own terms but appropriated and assimilated into a pre-existing framework of intelligibility that seeks to render the Other definable and ultimately governable. Following scholars such as Britton, Crowley, and Murdoch, I read Glissant's concept of opacity as articulating a counter-ethic: it unsettles the assumption that understanding or clarity is a prerequisite for ethical relation, inviting instead a mode of co-existence grounded in non-mastery.

It is important to distinguish between the absence of transparent representation and *silencing* in the Spivakian sense. As Britton notes, Glissant's formulation of Opacity diverges from Spivak's concern with the subaltern's inability to speak or be heard within dominant social discourse. Spivak argues that the silencing of the subaltern is rooted in the operation of hegemonic power that operates through epistemic violence.²⁷⁵ This violence both constitutes

²⁷³ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 107.

²⁷⁴ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

²⁷⁵ Spivak characterizes epistemic violence as "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other," a systematic destruction, marginalization and erasure of knowledge systems that results in "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity."

the colonial subject “as Other” and displaces their capacity to signify within dominant discourse.²⁷⁶ While Spivak emphasizes how hegemonic power both constitutes and “dislocates” the subaltern, rendering them voiceless within dominant representational systems,²⁷⁷ Glissant shifts attention to the limits of the dominant’s capacity to fully comprehend the Other. Drawing on Britton’s reading of Glissant, we can differentiate Glissant’s concept of opacity from Spivak’s critique of systemic marginalization. For Glissant, it is not the subaltern’s exclusion from discourse that is at stake, but rather the ethical imperative to refuse the demand for comprehension itself. In contrast to Spivak’s critique of enforced silence, Glissant suggests that opacity, which may be understood here as a refusal of full comprehension, constitutes a positive affirmation of difference rather than a condition of subjugation. It is this difference that affirms what he describes as the “density” of the Other, an irreducible presence that resists assimilation into dominant frameworks of knowledge and recognition.²⁷⁸ In Glissant’s thought, this refusal is not only conceptual but also historically situated, emerging through aesthetic and communicative practices that disrupt colonial expectations for full legibility and disclosure.

Glissant illustrates this through his account of how enslaved people in the Caribbean forged meaning and presence, not through transparent speech, but through *sound, noise, and excess*. Here, ‘transparent speech’ refers to speech that yields to clarity and comprehension. In Glissant’s account, opacity emerges as a tactical refusal within an asymmetrical and cross-cultural colonial relation:

From the outset (that is, from the moment Creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood. It seems that meaning and pitch went together for the uprooted individual, in the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery. It was the intensity of the sound that dictated meaning: the pitch of the sound conferred significance. Ideas were bracketed. One person could make himself understood through the subtle associations of sound, in which the master, so capable of managing “basic Creole” in other situations, got hopelessly lost. Creole spoken by the békés was never shouted out loud. Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason -Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 76.

²⁷⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 66–67, 92–93, 104–5.

²⁷⁷ Spivak’s concern distinguishes between two types of representation: “representation as “speaking for” (Vertretung), or politics; and representation as “re-presentation,” or depiction/portrayal (Darstellung), or rhetoric. She argues that the Subaltern is excluded from both. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 66–67, 84–85.

²⁷⁸ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 20; Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review* 9, no. 1/2 (1987): 34; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 133.

nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his , speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.²⁷⁹

This account exemplifies how opacity refuses colonial legibility by operating within a space of ambiguity and sonic excess.²⁸⁰ It transforms the colonizer's projections of animality (or lack) into *an ungraspable presence*.

Put differently, in a world that refused the subjugated the right to speak freely, that suppression was not countered by silence, but by a fugitivity of sound—a layered sonic opacity that moved strategically outside the slave-master's frame of recognition. Here, discourse is no longer primarily conceptual but affective, embodied, and saturated with resonance. As Glissant observes, “the pitch of the sound conferred significance.”²⁸¹ Speech is organized around excess and dissonance, crafting a form of communication that unsettles the colonizer's framework of comprehension. This affective disruption can be understood as both aesthetic and ethical: aesthetic in its reliance on sound, rhythm, and an embodied excess that exceeds fixed meaning; ethical insofar as this excess performs a refusal to be rendered transparent, resisting the dominant demand for legibility while affirming an irreducible difference. While for Spivak the inability to speak and be heard arises from historical and ideological factors that silence the subaltern within hegemonic discourse, Glissant turns the focus to the limits of the dominant's capacity to comprehend the Other. In this shift, opacity does not unfold as muteness but becomes an affective affirmation of irreducible difference.

Britton describes opacity as an “a strategy that assumes lack and transforms it into a positive force”.²⁸² Opacity may be understood not only as a withholding of meaning but an *ethical intervention*. It is a demand for the right to remain irreducible, unassimilable, and beyond the terms imposed by colonial systems of knowledge. As Glissant writes:

I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" him in my image.²⁸³

²⁷⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 123–24.

²⁸⁰ Celia Britton offers a compelling reading of this dynamic in the context of Martinique, emphasizing that opacity “opacity cannot mean simply hiding, because there is culturally as well literally—nowhere to hide.” In this context, opacity had to be produced as an “unintelligible presence” that “the master did not understand but did not realize that he did not understand.” See p 24-25 *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, by Celia Britton

²⁸¹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 123–24.

²⁸² Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 20; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 123–25.

²⁸³ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 198.

According to Glissant, Opacity, then, is neither concealment nor invisibility. It asserts a presence that does not need to justify itself — a presence unavailable to identification, classification, or appropriation.²⁸⁴ By emphasizing multiplicity rather than the binary of transparency and the opaque, it opens a space within which, as Glissant puts it, “shades of all the possible meanings” accumulate without being fixed.²⁸⁵ Opacity, then, troubles categorical systems of thought by refusing to be fully grasped or reduced, opening space for difference to persist beyond the demands for comprehension. It occupies what Glissant calls the “stubborn shadows,” the indeterminate space in between transparency and obscurity and legibility.²⁸⁶ It reorients relationality away from mastery toward coexistence grounded in irreducible difference, sustaining presence without reducing it to comprehension.²⁸⁷

4.5 The Aesthetic Force of Opacity

If the earlier discussion highlighted opacity’s epistemic and phenomenological pressures, here I turn to its specifically aesthetic operations. J. Michael Dash emphasizes that the act of “re-membering the body or recognizing the body as an unfathomable, shaping force” lies at the heart of Glissant’s challenge to the subject /object dynamic inherited from Enlightenment thought.²⁸⁸ Rather than merely withholding meaning, opacity can be felt as density, excess, and disorientation. Opacity not only destabilizes interpretation; it generates an affective disturbance that unsettles prior to thoughts intervention. What Glissant’s opacity offers, then, is an aesthetics of encounter grounded in epistemic refusal. His emphasis on sound, noise, pitch, and rhythm in Creole speech unfolds how opacity is not silence or absence but manifests as embodied intensity that reverberates through flesh. The “sonic scream” that was dismissed by the slave master as meaningless, becomes, in Glissant’s account, presentation rather than re-presentation. A force that cannot be reduced to signification but instead is felt

²⁸⁴ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24.

²⁸⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 123, 191.

²⁸⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 4; Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

²⁸⁷ Both Glissant and Lévinas critique the demand for transparency and gesture toward a mode of relation that exceeds comprehension. While their ethical projects differ fundamentally — Glissant’s opacity emerging from colonial histories, Lévinas’ ethics from an ethical orientation that precedes ontology — both invite us to rethink “understanding” as an affective welcoming, an openness to what cannot be fully known. I return to this resonance in my discussion of the caressing gaze.

²⁸⁸ Dash, “Writing the Body,” 609.

in the flesh as a visceral and unyielding force.²⁸⁹ Caught in the affective field of the Other, the mind, as Dash notes, “is not free to see and act but constantly in the grip of sensations emitted from the body.”²⁹⁰ In this way, vision no longer operates through detachment but moves toward a mode of sensuous proximity, where the body becomes the “threshold” through which aesthetic force is felt. In this context, proximity refers not to physical nearness alone but to a sensuous, bodily mode of perception in which the viewer is drawn into a non-mastering relation with the world. As Dash describes it, vision here offers the proximity of touch, and “the body becomes the threshold of contact between consciousness and the world, self and other.”²⁹¹ In my reading of Glissant, and following Dash, opacity can be understood as an ethical potentiality, a generative refusal that unsettles fixed frameworks of recognition and invites relation without mastery. Glissant figures this potentiality through an aesthetics of resonance and reverberation. In a passage comparing the voice of Saint-John Perse with the Antillean storyteller, he writes:

There are no torches surrounding his words; there is only a hand stretched toward the horizon It is the always possible infinite. The ring made by the voice is diffracted into the world.²⁹²

Here, discourse reverberates —diffracted and relational—rather than reducing to concepts or clarity. This opens up how opacity does not necessarily announce itself through spectacle or confrontation. It can operate through subtlety, dissonance, and an inaudible refusal to align with dominant frames of intelligibility. Opacity, in this unfolding, destabilizes the conventional distinction between subject and object by resisting the demand to be fully known or made transparent. In this sense, to engage opacity invites a different mode of relation. A relation marked by proximity rather than mastery, and by an openness grounded in embodied sensibility and vulnerability. It is here, in what Dash describes as a “vital zone of interaction between private and public, individual and collective” that opacity may exert its most disruptive force, unsettling the structures through which relation is typically stabilized and secured, opening onto a mode of encounter that refuses containment.²⁹³ This aesthetics of resonance and irreducibility, as I will return to in my discussion of Frida Orupabo’s work, may be seen to position opacity as an embodied mode of form that resists conceptual mastery.

²⁸⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 123–24.

²⁹⁰ Dash, “Writing the Body,” 610.

²⁹¹ This resonance between vision and touch anticipates my later discussion of Lévinas, where sensibility and proximity are central to the ethical encounter. Dash, “Writing the Body,” 611.

²⁹² Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 39.

²⁹³ Dash, “Writing the Body,” 609.

In the preceding sections , I discussed how Enlightenment ideals of lucidity and definability shaped Western expectations of art, meaning, and relation. Glissant situates opacity as a response to this epistemological legacy, which was instrumentalized within the colonial project that privileged universal models and categories. This project operated through a process of comprehending, a repressive grasping, that reduced and hierarchized difference, ultimately bolstering imperial control. Within this epistemic order, difference was not encountered on its own terms but appropriated and assimilated into a pre-existing framework of intelligibility that rendered the Other definable and therefore governable.

As Nicole Simek asks, “Under what conditions can opacity, or unintelligibility, be heard as resistance and elicit a response? Should address be understood in terms of an affective call and response?”²⁹⁴ Her questions open onto the problem of responsibility that Glissant’s opacity already gestures toward: if opacity refuses the demand to be made fully intelligible, what kind of listening or response might it invite? These questions lead directly into Lévinas’ ethics, where address, response, and responsibility are grounded in embodied vulnerability and exposure, rather than comprehension. This concern also underlies my own inquiry: what constitutes an ethical approach to these works, and, by extension, other forms of artistic production emerging within contexts of historical and colonial violence, without reducing them to objects of comprehension?

²⁹⁴ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 307.

5.0 Lévinas and the Problem of the Visual

If you could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be the other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power.²⁹⁵

The preceding chapter outlined Édouard Glissant's critique of transparency and his "demand for the right to opacity;" the right not to be reduced to epistemic clarity, recognition, or legibility.²⁹⁶ This demand destabilizes dominant Western epistemic assumptions that relation depends upon comprehension. It also raises the question of how we might envision difference differently: how might we think a relation that does not require transparency and understanding as its precondition.

While Glissant criticizes the demand for transparency, he does not offer a sustained analysis of the visual field itself. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), a Lithuanian-born French ethical philosopher of Jewish descent, by contrast, develops an extensive critique against the primacy of theoretical consciousness in Western philosophy and its objectifying gaze. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity: An Essay of Exteriority*, Lévinas argues that "theoretical thought, guided by the ideal of objectivity," cannot fulfill the aspiration toward an ethical relation. The essential of ethics, he writes, lies in an intention that exceeds the noesis-noema structure of cognition. Lévinas binds this assertion to a way of seeing when he goes on to say "[a]lready of itself ethics is an "optics."²⁹⁷

Lévinas argues that Western philosophical thought is shaped by what he calls a "totalizing" tendency that assimilates the Other to the Same.²⁹⁸ Inherent in this approach to the Other, argues Lévinas, is a certain formulation of knowing in which Other is "grasped," appropriated, and rendered a "property of thought":²⁹⁹ To approach the Other through such an intentional structure is, for Lévinas, "a way of approaching the known being such that its

²⁹⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other: (And Additional Essays)* (Duquesne University Press, 1987), 90.

²⁹⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

²⁹⁷ Lévinas writes: "But theoretical thought, guided by the ideal of objectivity, does not exhaust this aspiration; it remains this side of its ambitions. If, as this book will show, ethical relations are to lead transcendence to its term, this is because the essential of ethics is in its transcendent intention, and because not every transcendent intention has the noesis-noema structure. Already of itself ethics is an "optics." Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 29.

²⁹⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.

²⁹⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, trans. Hand, Sean (Basil Blackwell, 1989), 76.

alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes,” as reason, according to Lévinas, “knows only itself.”³⁰⁰

His critique productively intersects with Glissant’s insistence on opacity, the right *not* to be understood on the terms of the Other, as elaborated in *Poetics of relation* (1990). Glissant presents opacity both as a refusal of the West’s demand for transparency and as the condition for a non-appropriative relation grounded in freedom rather than comprehension. As he writes, the “right to opacity would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms,” and that “to feel in solidarity with him....it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image.”³⁰¹ In Glissant’s writing opacity emerges both as that which cannot be reduced, an active strategy of resistance, and an ethical stance against Western thought’s demand for transparency, — operating simultaneously across philosophical, ethical, political, performative, and affective registers — a dynamic elaborated in Chapter 4.³⁰²

The critical aspect of Glissant’s concept of opacity, Professor of African American studies John Drabinski argues, “lies in its anticolonial force, and therefore its resistance to certain senses of knowing and understanding that would seek to absorb...and possess.”³⁰³ What binds Lévinas and Glissant together, despite the disparity in their philosophical trajectories, is a shared commitment to preserving difference without subsuming it into sameness. This shared orientation has been taken up by Professor of Global Affairs Mary Gallagher who notes that, both thinkers “locate ethics in the defeat or transcendence of identarian reflexes or regimes of human classification”.³⁰⁴

While Glissant’s opacity offers a productive alternative to transparency, Professor Simek has observed, it risks being misread as a refusal of relation:

Rendering alterity and the aesthetic absolutely inscrutable can lead to a refusal to read, a refusal to engage that paradoxically repeats, in [a] different form, the refusal to enter into Relation that the gesture of respect ostensibly seeks to resist....³⁰⁵

³⁰⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42–44.

³⁰¹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190, 193.

³⁰² Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

³⁰³ John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (U of Minnesota Press, 2019), 43.

³⁰⁴ Mary Gallagher, “Ethics in the Absence of Reference Lévinas and the (Aesthetic) Value of Diversity on JSTOR,” *Lévinas Studies* 7 (2012): 96.

³⁰⁵ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

As Simek cautions, readings of opacity that render alterity and the aesthetic absolutely unknowable may lead to a withdrawal, rather than engagement.³⁰⁶ Rather than foreclosing relations, Glissant's notion of opacity shifts the ethical question from whether we relate to *how* we do so. Glissant's demand for opacity thus invites a rethinking of the way we approach visual arts: how may relation occur without returning to comprehension or interpretive capture? This question returns us to the guiding question of this dissertation: what constitutes an ethical approach to images and artworks that emerge from, or respond to, colonial histories of looking? Lévinas offers one possible entry into this problem. For Lévinas, conceptualization limits the freedom of the Other by reducing them to my idea of them.³⁰⁷

5.1 From Intelligibility to Radical Alterity

The relation with the Other, Lévinas writes, “overflows” comprehension.³⁰⁸ The Other cannot be thought of in terms of a concept, nor contained by thought, for this would assimilate the Other to the Same. Nor does the Other, argues Lévinas, “*affect* us in terms of a concept.”³⁰⁹ For Lévinas, the preservation of alterity therefore requires a departure from transcendental phenomenology as it fails to make space for the radically heterogeneous.³¹⁰ Contrary to Husserl's notion of intentionality, Lévinas insists that the experience of the infinite is not the *consciousness* of something. We cannot contain and assimilate the infinite within thought as we would an object, since thought can never transcend its own limits. For Lévinas, the encounter with the infinite, figured as the Face, interrupts signification and remains beyond the representational grasp of intentionality. It marks a rupture in the “totalizing tendency” toward the Other through which the Other is rendered an object of knowledge.³¹¹ For him, intelligibility functions as a form of mastery, reducing alterity through a “total adequation of the thinker with what is thought.”³¹² According to Lévinas, Western philosophies' focus on

³⁰⁶ Simek, “Stubborn Shadows,” 369.

³⁰⁷ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 90.

³⁰⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 6; Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 25.

³⁰⁹ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 6 (my italic).

³¹⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

³¹¹ Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* p 27: [I]ntentionality, where thought remains an adequation with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently non-adequation.

³¹² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 123–24.

the detached, rational, neutral, and reflective subject circumvents the ethical potential of the vulnerable receptiveness of the Self. Rather than approaching the Other with a theoretical gaze, Lévinas writes that an ethical relation is grounded, not in comprehension, but in an embodied responsiveness—a “sympathy and love” that is “distinct from impassible comprehension”.³¹³ Lévinas clarifies this contrast when he writes:

The intentional relation of representation is to be distinguished from every other relation [...] in that in it the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other.³¹⁴

Lévinas refuses to locate meaning in the epistemological relationship between the subject and object. He argues that the Western bias towards intelligibility, and its conflation of knowledge and being, leads to the effacement of alterity.³¹⁵ Accordingly, one of Lévinas' main objectives in *Totality and Infinity* is to describe a form of intentionality that is not-knowledge, an intentionality that allows one to reach beyond being and beyond totality. Significantly, Lévinas binds this “wholly different” form of intentionality to a way of seeing when he states that “ethics is an optics.”³¹⁶ This shift away from intentionality as grasping to an ethical responsiveness prepares the conceptual terrain for the methodology discussion in Chapter 6.

In describing an ethical relationship to alterity, Lévinas turns to the figure of the caress, first analyzing it in the erotic relation (where it is often deemed an ambiguous relation that falls short of the ethics) and later refining it as a model for a non-appropriative form of approach grounded in sensibility.³¹⁷ While the caress may be read metaphorically as a gesture that reaches toward otherness without mastery, Lévinas also emphasizes its literal dimension: the indispensability of the body in the movement from Self toward the Other. The body, he suggests, forms the site of ethical responsiveness, and modulates subjectivity. As Feminist theorist and Professor of Comparative literature Ewa Płonowska Ziarek argues, Lévinas rethinks embodiment as the locus of the fundamental ethical experience:

³¹³ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 6 Lévinas use of “sympathy” and “love” here should not be confused with emotional identification. Rather, these terms mark a non-reciprocal responsiveness that precedes comprehension. .

³¹⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 124.

³¹⁵ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43–44.

³¹⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

³¹⁷ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76; Diane Perpich, “From the Caress to the Word: Transcendence and the Feminine in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 1:44.

Lévinas rethinks embodiment not only as the condition of relation to objects but also as a prototype of an ethical experience. In contrast of the transcendence of a body in self-reflection, “oneself” or ipseity, signifies for Lévinas an embodied self – a prelogical, presynthetic entwinement of thought and carnality, or what Lévinas calls “being in one’s skin.”³¹⁸

5.2 The Face —Resisting Ontologization

The relation between the gaze and the presence of the singular other lies at the core of the problem which Lévinas’ seeks to address. According to Lévinas, Western philosophy has long privileged vision, and the enabling concept of light, which functions as a model of knowledge.³¹⁹ For Lévinas, light, which enables vision itself, becomes the condition that makes possible a movement of comprehension in which thought seeks translucency, clarity, and mastery. Vision opens a “horizon”, delivers beings “out of nothing[ness],” and in doing so, assimilates alterity into the sphere of the Same.³²⁰ As he writes, “[l]ight makes possible...this enveloping of the exterior by the inward, which is the very structure of the cogito and of sense.”³²¹

For Lévinas, this alignment of vision with knowledge constitutes a violent and imperialistic approach to alterity that forecloses the possibility of an ethical relation.³²² Seeing, he writes, is “an act that in some way appropriates the ‘seen’ to itself, ...endowing it with a signification, and, in the last analysis, constitutes it,” thereby reducing the Other to an object already grasped, integrated, and rendered conceptually available.³²³ In such a schema, the Other becomes a projection of the Self. It is precisely at this juncture, where vision collapses alterity into sameness, that Lévinas introduces the Face. His critique of what he sees as an imperialistic and ocular centric Western philosophical tradition, leads him to articulate an otherness that cannot be grasped, appropriated, or assimilated by vision. Lévinas’ point is not that vision never allows an ethical relation, but that vision as philosophical knowing,

³¹⁸ Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 49–50 Ziarek, and other feminist critics, have noted a tension in Levinas’ emphasis on embodiment, noting that it is complicated by Levinas’s tendency in his later work to purify maternity of sexuality and exclude eros and female sexuality from the ethical domain, even while arguing for the necessary interdependence of responsibility and incarnation,.

³¹⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43, 189.

³²⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43–44.

³²¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* (n.d.), 48?

³²² Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 90.

³²³ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

assimilates.³²⁴ Through his notion of The Face, the manifestation of the singular Other, that “exceeds the totality of the visual,” Lévinas proposes a mode of encounter that resists this imperialism of the gaze.³²⁵ As he writes:

The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me.³²⁶

This description of the Face marks Lévinas’ decisive break with the visual framework he critiques above. Lévinas suggests that the Face does not appear as an image to be grasped, but as an encounter that unmakes my categories and interrupts the sovereignty of the Self. It is from this point I turn to how Lévinas conceptualizes the Face, not to propose that art can have Face in the Lévinasian sense, but to draw out an ethical structure of an encounter that resists appropriation.

Lévinas uses the term “the Face” or “the Other” to name the contact with alterity. As Judith Butler observes, the Other, for Lévinas, not only refers to “the human Other” but appears as a “placeholder for an infinite ethical relation.”³²⁷ In what follows, I explore how Lévinas’ concept of the Face offers a way to think about visual encounters that does not reduce the Other to a legible, knowable image. This question is of particular concern for the ethics of approaching images and artworks that emerge from or respond to colonial histories of looking, as is the case with Frida Orupabo’s work. To encounter the Other as Face is to encounter an otherness that is not relative to the Self. This confrontation exposes me to a “surplus” that cannot be contained by thought and therefore resists assimilation.³²⁸ These uncircumscribable aspects of the Face disrupt any attempts to understand, categories, or conceptually grasp the Other, making it impossible to reduce her to an object of knowledge or assimilate her into my own frameworks.³²⁹

³²⁴ Following Paul Davies’ reading, I understand Levinas not as abandoning vision, but as critiquing a historically dominant philosophical model of vision in Western thought see Paul Davies, “The Face and the Caress: Lévinas’s Ethical Alterations of Sensibility,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Kleinberg-Levin (The University of California Press, 1993).

³²⁵ Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (Routledge, 1998), 13.

³²⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50–51 italics in original.

³²⁷ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 1st ed. (Fordham University Press, 2005), x.

³²⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.

³²⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194,199; Diane Perpich, “Figurative Language and the ‘Face’ in Levinas’s Philosophy,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, no. 2 (2005): 103.

Lévinas describes the Face as initiating a “calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same..”³³⁰ This interruption, effected by the presence of the radical Other, is what for Lévinas constitutes ethics. He describes how the Others “strangeness,” “irreducibility” and resistance “to my thoughts and my possessions” produce this ethical disruption, marking an ethical rupture rather than a conceptual grasp.³³¹ “This putting in question”, Lévinas writes, “emanates from the Other.”³³² When the Other as Face imposes itself on me and “introduces into me what [is] not in me,” I am opened beyond what previously framed my understanding.³³³

Lévinas describes this interruption not as a moment of understanding, but as a displacement of the self’s sovereignty, a moment he names “epiphany.”³³⁴ Because the Other as Face cannot be conceptually grasped, it interrupts the subject’s reliance on representational mastery and unsettles the authority of the knowing ego. I am, in Lévinasian terms, called outward by the encounter with the Other as Face, a movement that unsettles the Self’s tendency toward an enclosed perspective. Lévinas suggests that the exposure to the Face is what punctures the horizon of the Self and interrupts its habitual return to itself. What arises in this encounter, then, is not comprehension of the Other, but what Lévinas calls infinity—a term that indicates the impossibility of conceptual closure.³³⁵ This inability to assimilate the Other is not, in Lévinas account, a limitation of understanding, but follows from the Face’s structural resistance to conceptual “possession.”³³⁶

Lévinas stresses that the encounter with alterity is not one of domination but of non-violent “teaching.” The Face issues what he names a “pacific relation”, a form of ethical instruction that emerges through resistance rather than forceful imposition.³³⁷ The Face offers what Lévinas calls “total resistance”: it resists my efforts to grasp it, yet “does not do violence to

³³⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

³³¹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

³³² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

³³³ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.

³³⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49–51.

³³⁵ Ethan Kleinberg, “Ethics Beyond the Body: Descartes and Heidegger in Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*,” *Parole Gelées* 17, no. 2 (1999): 43, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P7172003101>; Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

³³⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

³³⁷ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.

me, does not act negatively.”³³⁸ For Lévinas, this interruption loosens the Self’s enclosed horizon, redirecting it toward what exceeds its established frameworks.³³⁹

For my purposes, what matters is that Lévinas names this ethical resistance “non-violent” and structurally prior to cognition. This signals a mode of relation founded in embodied exposure, rather than one that relies on conceptual apprehension.³⁴⁰ This shift opens the possibility of articulating a non-appropriate approach to visual encounters. It is precisely the reduction of alterity to the Same that Lévinas seeks to unsettle through his theorization of the Face — a mode of encounter that precedes and exceeds intentionality, resists conceptual capture, and, in my reading, calls into question the disembodied subject of ethics.

5.3 Sensibility: The body as the Locus of the Ethical Relation

Lévinas’ ethics radically displaces the notion of reflective consciousness and intentionality. His ethical subject is not tied to the advent of consciousness but is summoned through the bodily exposure to the Face of the Other. This constitutes a primary level of encounter, preceding thought, and representation. He locates this primary level of encounter within the very materiality of the body. This displacement of consciousness is termed “sensibility,” described as an unwilling embodied susceptibility and responsiveness — a state of radical

³³⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197 Levinas writes: “The idea of infinity, the overflowing of finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity [.....] The ‘resistance’ of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical. The first revelation of the other, presupposed in all the other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation.”

³³⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

³⁴⁰ On the Lévinasian distinction between Desire and need: Lévinas uses the term (metaphysical) ‘Desire’ to describe the ethical, non-appropriative orientation toward the Other. Desire moves from the familiar and thus assimilable toward what is unknown and ungraspable as a response to the Other’s alterity. This conception, as Tengelyi notes, marks a departure from the traditional assumption that experience counts as a form of knowledge grounded in “a theoretical attitude” toward the world.” Need, by contrast, “aims” at an object that can fulfill a lack and therefore remains within totality. For my purposes it is useful to point out that Desire, in Lévinas’ thought, is closely related to *Eros* and the structure of the Caress. As Lévinas writes: “Eros is not accomplished as a subject that fixes an object, nor as a projection, toward a possible. Its movement consists in going beyond the possible.” See: Tengelyi, *Experience of Infinity in Lévinas*, particularity p 122-123 and John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Lévinas* (State University of New York Press, 2001), 65, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/163/monograph/book/9024>.

passivity and receptivity that precedes consciousness and representation, thereby grounding the very conditions of thought.³⁴¹ As Lévinas writes, illustrating this embodied responsibility:

It is because subjectivity is sensibility – an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other, that is, signification . . . that a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin.³⁴²

This model of subjectivity contrasts with philosophical tendencies, particularly within strands of Western tradition, that prioritizes detachment, autonomy, and transcendence of the body. Lévinas ethical subject, by contrast, is both embodied and vulnerable.³⁴³ This vulnerability, in Lévinas' account, is precisely what enables ethical relationality and is the basis of ethics.³⁴⁴

Lévinas is not advocating the abandonment of reason or an anti-intellectual position; rather, he is criticizing what he sees as a philosophical predisposition toward the theoretical and rationalist ego that ignores the underlying premise that the subject is always already embodied and in this world. Indeed, Lévinas ties ethical receptiveness to an openness that transcends the limits of our experiences.³⁴⁵ This foundational priority of the ethical

³⁴¹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 135-138, 188; Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 129 In a remark in *Otherwise than being beyond essence* Levinas emphasizes his debt to Kant and his elaboration on a "sense that is not measured by being or not being; but being on the contrary is determined on the basis of sense".

³⁴² Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 71.

³⁴³ It may be illuminating to consider how Lévinas' notion of the radical Other diverges from his contemporary Maurice Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic notion of the subject-other relation. In the posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid both the notion of alterity as being *beyond* comprehension, and a notion of the Other that leads to its assimilation. Instead, Merleau-Ponty, avoiding a subject-object dualism, describes an intertwined "chiasmic" relationship between the self and the Other that overlaps and encroaches in the same way as he famously described the relationship of touch and being touched in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This intertwining is exemplified in Merleau-Ponty's statement that "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts." (Footnote Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 159) Lévinas, however, takes issue with Merleau-Ponty's notion of a common corporeality. Where, as Cathryn Vasseleu, puts it "[t]he double touch conveys the relation between self and other as dual elements of a singular intercorporeality or a social life that comes of a mutual knowledge of belonging to the world". Lévinas resists this reversibility. For Lévinas, to assume that the touch of one's own hands applies equally to the hands of another amounts to projection of the self and an assimilation of alterity to the same. Lévinas criticism of Merleau-Ponty, Vasseleu notes, is due to Merleau-Ponty's "portrayal of intersubjectivity in terms of knowledge. The 'human' is constituted in terms of knowledge in the reversibility of flesh."³⁴³ In Merleau-Ponty's intertwined relationship with the Other, alterity is mediated through a shared corporeal schema, by contrast, for Lévinas the Other is not encountered through such reciprocity, because the Other "is [in] no way affected by the relation that can be established between it and its correlative".³⁴³ See Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty*, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1998) particularly p 29, 35, 64 and Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 85.

³⁴⁴ Alison Assiter, "Kierkegaard and Vulnerability," in *Vulnerability* (Routledge, 2013), 30.

³⁴⁵ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 25–28.

relationship over abstract being is the core of Lévinas' intervention, a point highlighted by feminist philosopher Chloë Taylor explains:

Lévinas argues against the Western philosophic tradition, and against Heidegger in particular, that ontology is not fundamental. Rather, for Lévinas, ethics, a relation to and for an other, is prior to being, grounding human existence. Before we "are," we are already in a relation to others, whatever the order of the verb in this sentence. It is therefore a mistake to begin by theorizing what the being of the self is, independent of its relations of vulnerability and responsiveness to others, because the self never is independent of or prior to these ethical terms. Ethics is the fundamental human experience, and is grounded in relations to others.³⁴⁶

Lévinas' focus is consistently shifted from the Self and its freedom to the irreducible alterity of the Other and our responsibility "for-the-Other." This responsibility, being irreducible to consciousness, is the ethical foundation.³⁴⁷ The Face cannot be reduced to a physical face, but is, as Lévinas writes, a "manifestation of a face over and beyond form." This presence, he elaborates, consists in its "refusal to be contained" and as such is not graspable in any intentional relation.³⁴⁸ Therefore, what affects the subject in the encounter with the Other are the *formless*, transcendent aspects of the Face. These aspects are fundamentally unknowable, and ungraspable by intentional consciousness, as the Face's manifestation, according to Lévinas, "upsurge[es] outside of its plastic image."³⁴⁹ As Professor of Philosophy Robert Burggraeve, writes:

Paradoxically, the other's appearing is executed as a withdrawal, or literally, as 'retraite' or 'anachorese'. The epiphany of the other is always also a breaking-through and a throwing into confusion of that very epiphany, and as such the other always remains 'enigmatic,' intruding on me as the 'irreducible,' 'separate and distinct,' 'strange,' in short as 'the other'.³⁵⁰

Taken together, this ambiguity, where the Face appears through the material while at the same time exceeding it, is precisely what connects the Face's transcendence to the body's sensibility. The Face, as Lévinas tells us, is "weighted down with a skin."³⁵¹ It affects me through my embodied vulnerability, yet what addresses me in that encounter surpasses every

³⁴⁶ Chloë Taylor, "Lévinasian Ethics and Feminist Ethics of Care:," *Symposium* 9, no. 2 (2005): 218, <https://doi.org/10.5840/symposium20059220>.

³⁴⁷ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 71.

³⁴⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66,194; Perpich, "Figurative Language and the 'Face' in Lévinas's Philosophy," 103.

³⁴⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 262.

³⁵⁰ Roger Burggraeve, "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Lévinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (1999): 2.2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0047-2786.t01-1-00003>.

³⁵¹ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 85.

visible or material feature.³⁵² The Face extracts itself from the material, but never completely, offering itself to sight while opening onto an invisible plane that leads us *beyond* the visible. In this reading, the physical presence of the Other therefore becomes the site where transcendence is encountered, without collapsing the Other into empirical embodiment.

The ethical relation is characterized, in Ziarek's reading of Lévinas, by "prereflective sensibility characterized by touch rather than by vision."³⁵³ As Lévinas writes:

In starting with *touching*, interpreted not as palpation but as caress, and *language*, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact, we have tried to describe proximity as irreducible to consciousness.³⁵⁴

Challenging the traditional mode of intellectual and visual apprehension, Lévinas instead suggests an ethical form of touch in the form of "the caress." This touch is not "palpation" — a touch aimed at objective investigation, measurement, or mastery— but instead signifies a passive mode of corporeal exposure: "as proximity, and not as an experience of proximity".

³⁵⁵ Proximity resists resolution into "images" or themes, as it addresses "what is incommensurable with it." This is because Alterity is "refractory to thematization" and "transcendent" eluding attempts to make the source of affection "a theme of representation"³⁵⁶ It is in this experience of proximity as extreme exposure, the state of "being in one's skin" which Ziarek describes as the inability to escape one's skin, that, for Lévinas, the very foundation of ethical responsibility emerges.³⁵⁷

5.4 Responsibility and the horizon of choice

Responsibility is an anarchic obligation that does not originate within the Self. Lévinas insists that ethical obligation is not intentional and precedes choice, autonomy, and the spontaneity of will. Instead, it is experienced as a radical passivity in which the subject is acted on. As Lévinas puts it, the subject is "ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me."³⁵⁸ This

³⁵² Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 85.

³⁵³ Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus*, 51.

³⁵⁴ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 80.

³⁵⁵ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 80.

³⁵⁶ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 80.

³⁵⁷ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 89; Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus*, 50.

³⁵⁸ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 87.

obligation is awakened by the exposure to the radical Other, as what David Levin describes in his reading of Lévinas, “at a primordial level of our embodiment, prior to reflective judgment and even prior to volition”.³⁵⁹

Lévinas articulates this most forcefully in his later work, particularly in *Otherwise than being, or Beyond Essence*, where responsibility is described as the pre-reflexive structure of subjectivity itself.³⁶⁰ This formulation underpins his core thesis that: responsibility is the “essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity,” where “the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics.”³⁶¹ Subjectivity is thus constituted through decentering and exposure to the Other rather than through self-positing freedom, confirming, for Lévinas, that the subject is “[o]bsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject ‘contemplating freely.’”³⁶² In this encounter, the passive subject is a “being receiving the idea of Infinity, receiving since it cannot derive it from itself.”³⁶³

This unwilling susceptibility inherent in proximity, which Lévinas defines as an “anarchic” obligation, is interpreted by theorists like Judith Butler and Ewa Ziarek, albeit with different emphases, as creating a “horizon of choice” anchored in our responsibility, redefining “freedom in relational terms.”³⁶⁴ This view opens up an understanding of agency as occurring within a “field of constraint.”³⁶⁵ As Butler observes, Lévinas’ ethical encounter is not established “by virtue of their sameness.”³⁶⁶ This ethical relationship defies any affinity or shared identity, countering the Hegelian model of reciprocal recognition, which implicitly demands that the subject must somehow be like the Other.³⁶⁷ The inexhaustible responsibility that is bestowed upon us in the encounter with the Other does not, therefore, rest of any sense of familiarity or shared community; whether it be racial, sexual, cultural, religious, or national.³⁶⁸

³⁵⁹ David Michael Levin, *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment*, Reprint 2019. (University of California Press, 1999), 240.

³⁶⁰ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*.

³⁶¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, “Ethics and Infinity,” *CrossCurrents* 34, no. 2 (1984): 194.

³⁶² Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 112.

³⁶³ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203–4.

³⁶⁴ Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 40; Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 82–83; Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus*, 2.

³⁶⁵ Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” 19.

³⁶⁶ Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 139–40.

³⁶⁷ Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” 27–28.

³⁶⁸ Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 139–40.

What stands out in Lévinas' account of responsibility is the structure it reveals: an ethical responsiveness that precedes choice, intention, and cognition. Responsibility names a mode of being affected in and through the body—a susceptibility that interrupts mastery and decenters the sovereign subject. This conception of ethical subjectivity provides a conceptual orientation for approaching artworks without assigning them the status of the ethical Other. Instead, it shifts the viewer's position toward embodied openness, rather than attempting to fully grasp or control them intellectually. It is this ethical structure that prepares the methodological orientation developed in Chapter 6, where I develop the caressing gaze as a non-appropriative mode of looking, that is one that does not try to categorize, reduce, and control.

5.5 Possible objections

Lévinas is one of only few philosophers of ethics to conceive of subjectivity and the ethical relation as fundamentally embodied and vulnerable. However, as Judith Butler points out, Lévinas account of vulnerability does not reckon with the differential distribution of exposure across racialized, gendered, and political bodies.³⁶⁹ Vulnerability, she insists, is not a neutral condition. The body we inhabit has “its invariably public dimension.” “Our skin and flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch and to violence.”³⁷⁰ Vulnerability, as such, are shaped by histories of violence and structures of precarity we must reckon with. Paul Gilroy similarly warns that philosophical projects, like Lévinas, that presume a “raceless” humanism risk obscuring the very real, ongoing injuries produced by racialized ways of seeing and knowing. His point is not that Lévinas should be dismissed, but that any appeal to embodied susceptibility must remain vigilant to the political and historical conditions that determine which bodies are perceptible and which remain on the edges of visibility.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” 147.

³⁷⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2006), 26.

³⁷¹ Gilroy as quoted in John E. Drabinski, “Vernacular Solidarity: On Gilroy and Levinas,” *Levinas Studies* 7 (2012): 177–78 Gilroy writes: The deliberate wholesale renunciation of ‘race’ proposed here even views the appearance of an alternative, metaphysical humanism premised on face-to-face relations between different actors — beings of equal worth — as preferable to the problems of inhumanity that raciology creates. If this metaphysics ultimately acquires a religious cast . . . [in] the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas . . . it can be rescued from the worst excesses of idealism if only it is recognized as incorporating a provocative attempt to reactivate political sensibilities so that they flow outside the patterns set for them in a world of fortified nation-states and antagonistic ethnic groups. ”.

For my purposes, these critiques do not undermine Lévinas' ethical framework; rather, they deepen it. They remind us that an ethics grounded in sensibility cannot bracket the fact that vulnerability is differentially distributed, and that the "call" of the Other is shaped by social hierarchies that condition whose suffering becomes legible. What Lévinas' offers is an ethical structure in which *responsibility begins in embodied exposure*. While Butler and Gilroy sharpen the need to understand that exposure as historically situated. Taken together, these critiques inform the methodological approach I develop in the next chapter: an ethical mode of looking that neither demands transparency nor assumes universality but remains responsive to the differentiated vulnerabilities that shape how artworks address us.

Transitional note: In what follows, I do not approach artworks as ethical subjects or claim that they possess "face" in the Lévinasian sense, although I agree with Judith Butler that, at times "images imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation;" rather, I draw from what Lévinas names the ethical structure of the Face, the ethical conditions of approach; non-appropriation, exposure, and embodied responsiveness.³⁷²

³⁷² Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 135.

6.0 Rethinking vision

Sight, by reason of its distance and its totalizing embrace, imitates or prefigures the "impartiality" of the intellect and its refusal to hold to what the immediacy of the sensible would dispose, or what it would constitute. The proper sense of this disposition moreover is in fact something different; it is not at all exhausted in arresting the movement and dynamism of knowledge.

—Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*

To structure, classify, and order the diversity of humankind into a hierarchy of races, modern Western epistemologies often relied on a disengaged and disembodied process of observation—a mode of sight divorced from the influence of other senses. This form of vision not only elevated sight above other senses but also strategically muted tactile, auditory, and affective registers that might unsettle its claim to objective detachment.³⁷³ In other words, the dominance of sight depended on the suppression of sensory modes that are relational, embodied, and responsive, precisely the modes that ground Lévinas' account of sensibility and ethical responsiveness.³⁷⁴ In light of this legacy, ethically oriented approaches to art and visual culture must grapple with the ethics of seeing and the historical entanglements of vision with domination, racialization, classification, and other forms of epistemic control.

Against the rational epistemic and its assumptions of universal truth, this section develops what I call the caressing gaze. This is a mode of ethical seeing grounded in Lévinas' rethinking of sensibility and relationality, and responsive to Édouard Glissant's "demand for the right to opacity."³⁷⁵ As discussed in Chapter 3, the rationalist, distanced, and objectifying gaze historically underpinned colonial and scientific epistemologies, reinforcing structures of objectification and possession. In this mode, vision has functioned not only as a mode of perception, but as an ontological force, shaping how the self, the Other, and relationality are conceived. Lévinas argues, that this approach to the Other is grounded in a specific mode of knowing, one that "grasps", appropriates and renders a "property of thought."³⁷⁶ However, across his writings, Lévinas opens a different possibility: a form of vision that does not dominate but instead sustains proximity without grasping—a mode of seeing that "is not at

³⁷³ For an in-depth discussion see Chapter 3..

³⁷⁴ Davies, "The Face and the Caress."

³⁷⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

³⁷⁶ Lévinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 76.

all exhausted in arresting the movement and dynamism of knowledge”.³⁷⁷ If “ethics is an optics,” as Lévinas suggests, then we must ask: What kind of vision would be adequate to an ethical relation?³⁷⁸ In this section, I explore how Lévinas’ notion of the caress, which he develops in *Time and the Other* and further refines in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or beyond essence*, can be rethought as a *caressing gaze*, a mode of ethical seeing that does not assimilate or objectify. This move is particularly crucial in light of the colonial legacies of vision which have not only structured individual spectatorship but also shaped curatorial and institutional ways of engaging with art and visual culture.

My framing of the caress as a mode of vision draws on Lévinas’ later writings, where he gestures toward vision as sensuous proximity. Read through the lens of Glissant’s demand for the *right to opacity*, this reconfiguration of vision offers an ethical modality that resists epistemic capture. If an ethical gaze is to resist the colonial impulse to fully know and categorize, it must not only sustain a space of unknowability and difference but also reject the compulsion to measure the Other against predetermined norms of legibility.³⁷⁹

This raises, for my project, a deeper methodological question, one that Lévinas rarely thematizes: What kind of approach, what kind of method understood not as procedure or technique but as *an ethical orientation*, could attune us to a relation with the Other that cannot be reduced to comprehension and mastery? As discussed in Chapter 5, Lévinas rethinks intentionality not as a mode of a subjects grasping but as a mode of radical passivity, what John Drabinski describes as a “reversal of intentionality” grounded in embodied vulnerability.³⁸⁰ This passivity, which Lévinas describes as “as being-in-one’s-skin, having-the-other-in-one’s-skin,” is a sensibility in which the subject is already affected, already ethically exposed — a form of animation that precedes volition, dislocates identity, and marks a relation beyond possession.³⁸¹

³⁷⁷ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 63.

³⁷⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

³⁷⁹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190 For a more detailed discussion of Glissant’s critique of transparency and its implications for the ethics of vision, see the Chapter 4 on Opacity.

³⁸⁰ John Drabinski, “Incarnate Historiography and the Problem of Method,” in *Levinas and the Postcolonial* (University Press, 2022), 29–30, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748647064-004>.

³⁸¹ Drabinski, “Incarnate Historiography and the Problem of Method,” 32–33; Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 114–15 Note that Levinas refers to this structure as “inspiration”, a form of ethical openness that precedes volition. In the context of visual sensibility, I understand this a mode of ethical animation — an affective stirring that precedes and exceeds cognition. .

This exposedness, argues David Levin, can be thought of as an ethical arousal of the passive and receptive subject. An arousal that has not yet been cognitively processed, but is always already; felt in the flesh. This is, writes Levin, “... an obligation to and for the other [that] has always already taken hold of us—through our very flesh.” Yet as Levin notes, “this responsibility has not yet been consciously enacted. It is up to us to realize it in the exercise of our freedom.”³⁸²

The caressing gaze builds on this insight by proposing not only a way of seeing, but a way of approaching the artwork from a position of ethical vulnerability and exposure on the part of the viewer —particularly when the work is approached from a position of structural privilege. This question is central to my research question, which asks: what constitutes an ethical approach to images and artworks that emerge from, or respond, to colonial histories of looking? This inquiry stems from my own position as a white cis-gendered woman engaging with artworks emerging from histories of racialized representation, where the risk of reproducing colonial ways of seeing remains an ongoing ethical concern. The caressing gaze is grounded in Lévinas’ account of sensibility and exposure, an ethical structure that calls us to respond to every Other as singular and irreducible. Yet while the ethical demand applies universally, the conditions under which artworks are encountered are not neutral. The caressing gaze emerges, in my project, from a specific concern: how to approach artworks shaped by racialized violence and the colonial gaze’s drive to homogenize difference from a position historically implicated in visual mastery. In this sense, the method does not restrict the ethical encounter to particular viewers but rather foregrounds how the mode of approach must remain accountable to the histories that structure vision, without presuming that such accountability can ever be fully secured. It is an ethical orientation that, following Glissant, aims to safeguard opacity, while also attending to the asymmetries that mark the act of seeing.³⁸³ In this context, to extend Lévinas’ notion of the Caress as an ethical mode of seeing, becomes a way of developing a form of visual engagement that resists grasping, mastery, or stabilization, while instead sustaining an ethical space of difference.³⁸⁴ This

³⁸² Levin, *The Philosopher’s Gaze*, Reprint 2019., 242.

³⁸³ While Lévinasian passivity describes the subject’s condition of ethical exposure — a sensibility grounded in vulnerability and non-mastery —opacity, as Glissant formulates it, is a demand from the Other: a refusal to be reduced, grasped, or made transparent within dominant frames of understanding. As Glissant writes on page 190 in *Poetics of Relation*, “In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments.” Opacity thus marks the ethical necessity of relation without comparison.

³⁸⁴ While Glissant formulates opacity as a universal right — the right of every subject not to be fully understood— the stakes of this right are not evenly distributed. Opacity becomes ethically and politically

reorientation of vision is not undertaken in abstraction, but in response to the historically specific regime, traced in Chapter 3, in which vision functioned as an instrument of epistemic control and racialized classification.

6.1 From intentionality to Exposure: Vision and the Ethical Encounter

As I have previously discussed, Lévinas' critiques intentionality for structuring perception as a mode of assimilation —where vision has historically functioned as a means of effacing difference and absorbing the Other into consciousness.³⁸⁵ The suspension of cognition or intellectual grasp in the encounter of the Other is, for Lévinas, fundamental to the ethical relation.³⁸⁶ One of his main objectives in *Totality and Infinity* is to describe a type of intentionality that is not-knowledge —a mode of relationality that does not contain, objectify, and assimilate the Other. This form of intentionality, Lévinas argues, enables us to reach beyond being, beyond totality and open up an *ethical space of difference*. As Drabinski notes, this reconception of intentionality has significant methodological consequences: it challenges traditional models of philosophical method by grounding thought in the structure of passivity, affect, and ethical vulnerability, rather than in sovereign cognition.³⁸⁷ In this section I extend this rethinking of method into the visual field, asking what it may mean for vision — and for spectatorship— to take on the structure of the passivity. Significantly Lévinas binds this “wholly different” form of intentionality to a way of seeing when he states that:

..ethics is an optics. But it is a "vision" without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type.³⁸⁸

It is important to note, however, that Lévinas does not develop an ethics of vision as such; his remarks on “optics” remain suggestive rather than systematic. My methodological use of

urgent in contexts shaped by historical violence and racialized regimes of visibility. In this sense, opacity is universal in principle but asymmetrical in practice: its ethical force intensifies where the right not to be understood has been structurally denied.

³⁸⁵ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 124.

³⁸⁶ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 11.

³⁸⁷ See Drabinski, “Incarnate Historiography and the Problem of Method,” 20–27 on the methodological implications of Levinas' radicalized intentionality and the ethical reorientation of phenomenology. See also my discussion in Chapter 4.

³⁸⁸ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

vision therefore extends his formulation rather than reproducing a Lévinasian account of seeing.

Lévinas' formulation of "ethics is an optics" does not seek to redeem vision but rather unsettle its epistemic certainty, pointing instead toward a form of relationality that cannot be reduced to comprehension.³⁸⁹ In a later essay, "Language and Proximity" (1967), Lévinas complicates his earlier critique of vision by making a significant concession. While in *Totality and Infinity* he frames vision as an instrument of epistemic mastery, here he suggests that vision may not necessarily be bound to comprehension and domination:

Sight is, to be sure, an openness, a consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as a consciousness, is called vision; but [even] in its subordination to cognition, sight [still] maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches.³⁹⁰

This passage is notable because it marks a development in Lévinas' thinking. While *Totality and Infinity*, maintains a strict separation between phenomenality and the infinite, Lévinas' later work unsettles this distinction —suggesting that the infinite does not stand apart from phenomenality but instead, as Diane Perpich notes, "makes it the very modality in which the infinite gains a foothold in being and disturbs phenomenality without settling into its horizons."³⁹¹ In this shift, sensibility emerges as a pre-reflexive site of ethical exposure, where the subject is sensually affected *before* comprehension takes hold.³⁹²

This reconsideration of sensibility also raises questions about how Lévinas approaches vision in his later work. While Lévinas' earlier writings largely treat vision as aligned with objectification and epistemic mastery, associating vision with imposition of sameness onto the Other, his assertion in "Language and Proximity" complicates this opposition. Here,

³⁸⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

³⁹⁰ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 100:118.

³⁹¹ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Lévinas*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2008), 116.

³⁹² Where, in *Totality and Infinity* the ethical relation, for Lévinas must transcend the phenomenal, in *Otherwise than Being* ethical responsibility is grounded in sensibility —moving toward a model where the ethical is intricately with, and yet irreducible to, being. This necessity demands, as Paul Davies observes, a re-evaluation of concrete experience, leading to an evolution in the conception of the caress. The caress moves from an ambiguous, non-ethical figure of transcendence linked primarily to the feminine and eros in his early works, to a key metaphorical trope for ethical sensibility and proximity in his later philosophy, thereby providing the essential model for the ethical grounding in vulnerability and contact. For more on this shift see Paul Davies, "The Face and the Caress: Lévinas's Ethical Alterations of Sensibility," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Kleinberg-Levin (The University of California Press, 1993). Diane Perpich, "From the Caress to the Word," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. Tina Chanter, Re-Reading the Canon (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

Lévinas states that “the visible caresses the eye,” suggesting that vision does not necessarily function as a tool of comprehension and domination but may instead sustain proximity without grasping.³⁹³

In his essay *The Face and the Caress: Lévinas’ Ethical Alterations of Sensibility*, Paul Davies argues that Lévinas’ claim that “the visible caresses the eye” suggests a reconfiguration of vision, not as a fundamental break but as an “alteration in sensibility” that opens a shift away from detachment and epistemic mastery.³⁹⁴ Rather than securing knowledge, vision — understood *through sensibility* — may instead draw the viewer into proximity and exposure.³⁹⁵ This shift away from vision as a totalizing force, away from mastery and towards proximity, finds its most radical articulation in Lévinas’ concept of the caress. We are ethically stirred, sensibly affected, by what we see: “The visible,” Lévinas says, “caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches.”³⁹⁶

David Levin reiterates and develops this shift, noting that Lévinas like Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the possibility of a gaze that is not “bent on domination, not driven by the need to reduce the other to the same”³⁹⁷ This, he suggests, opens for a mode of vision that moves “beyond being” beyond ontology,³⁹⁸ By gesturing toward a way seeing that operates outside of ontological possession, vision does not impose mastery but can be interpreted as, in Levin’s reading, rendering the viewer ethically vulnerable, creating the possibility of an embodied responsiveness that sustains an ethical space of difference.

Davies further emphasizes that Lévinas is not simply challenging the primacy of vision. Instead, he rethinks sensibility itself, not as a hierarchy of senses, but as a mode of encounter that resists mastery where the viewer is sensibly affected by what she sees. He does this by rethinking vision (and hearing) through his notion of *the caress*. This, argues Davies, is not a mere metaphorical extension but signals an “alteration of sensibility” itself.³⁹⁹ In doing so Lévinas challenges the representation of vision as a sense which guarantees the subject of vision detachment. By describing vision in terms of touch, Lévinas fragments the subject of

³⁹³ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 100:118.

³⁹⁴ Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 256.

³⁹⁵ Davies, “The Face and the Caress.”

³⁹⁶ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 100:118.

³⁹⁷ David Michael Levin, *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* (University of California Press, 2023), 248.

³⁹⁸ Levin, *The Philosopher’s Gaze*, 248.

³⁹⁹ Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 256-258, 269.

vision; the eye is no longer synecdochally tied to a coherent, controlling viewer. Vision, then, becomes dispersed within a field of contact, where the beholder is exposed, drawn into proximity, and rendered vulnerable.⁴⁰⁰ This entails transposing the beholder from the position of the “voyeur”, a position of mastery that relies on sustaining a distance and detachment between the viewer and the viewed, to one of *proximity*, where seeing entails a surrender of grasp. In this reading, rather than securing knowledge, vision begins to open toward a site of proximity — one that is not structured by comprehension, but by sensibility as exposure and vulnerability: an embodied openness in the act of looking. As Davies observes, for Lévinas proximity does not simply describe physical nearness but a mode of embodied responsivity — a contact that unsettles mastery, turning the subject into the one who is sensually affected rather than the one who is in control. In sensibility as proximity, Lévinas initiates a radical inversion in which mastery gives way to vulnerability, a shift that he later intensifies in *Otherwise than being*.⁴⁰¹ Lévinas, according to Feminist theorist and Professor of philosophy Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, rethinks the body as the locus of the fundamental ethical experience:

Lévinas rethinks embodiment not only as the condition of relation to objects but also as a prototype of an ethical experience. In contrast of the transcendence of a body in self-reflection, “oneself” or ipseity, signifies for Lévinas an embodied self – a prelogical, presynthetic entwinement of thought and carnality, or what Lévinas calls “being in one’s skin.”⁴⁰²

In the context of colonial visual regimes, such non-grasping is not merely ethical posture but a refusal of the classificatory logic that rendered racialized bodied transparent and measurable as objects of knowledge.

6.2 Vision as Sensibility: Vulnerability and exposure

While Davies examines Lévinas’ rethinking of vision in “Language and Proximity”, Lévinas pushes his argument further in *Otherwise than Being*. In “Language and Proximity”, he moves beyond his earlier association of vision with knowledge, opening vision toward a mode of sensibility that resists mastery. When he writes, “the visible caresses the eye,” it

⁴⁰⁰ Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 257.

⁴⁰¹ Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 266–67.

⁴⁰² Ziarek, *An Ethics of Dissensus*, 49–50.

marks a shift from vision as an act of comprehension to one in which the subject is sensually affected by the visible. However, in *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas pushes this further, stating:

In every vision contact is announced: sight and hearing caress the visible and the audible. Contact is not an openness upon being, but an exposure of being. In this caress proximity signifies as proximity, and not as an experience of proximity.⁴⁰³

In “Language and Proximity”, vision is passively affected by the visible rather than mastering it. Vision remains entangled with cognition, even though it is no longer reducible to it. By contrast, in *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas develops this account further, arguing that vision takes on *the structure of the caress*.⁴⁰⁴ When he writes “sight and hearing caress the visible and audible”, he shifts the emphasis from vision as perception to vision as an ethical encounter that, like the caress, approaches alterity without grasping. This signals a broader transformation: “Contact is not an openness upon being. But an exposure of being. In the caress proximity signifies as proximity, and not as an experience of proximity.”⁴⁰⁵ Here, Lévinas refuses to frame proximity as something we *have*. Indeed, Lévinas resists the reduction of proximity to an experience that can be grasped or totalized as knowledge. In this way, the caress emerges as a mode of sensibility that, while maintaining contact with sensation, nevertheless extends beyond this contact, reaching toward an unknown that is never negated. No longer merely a relation to the visible, the caress sustains an openness that exceeds cognition, what Lévinas describes as:

In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there. The caress is the not coinciding proper to contact, a denuding never naked enough.⁴⁰⁶

The caress, Lévinas states, is the “very gap between approach and approached” — a relation that never arrives at possession but instead maintains an irreducible disparity, much like the space between artwork and viewer that resists interpretive closure.⁴⁰⁷ This disparity is not a

⁴⁰³ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 80.

⁴⁰⁴ While my theory chapter builds on the face-to-face structure introduced in *Totality and Infinity*, the caress allows for a further rethinking of visual relationality — one grounded in sensibility, passivity, as developed in *Otherwise than being*.

⁴⁰⁵ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 80.

⁴⁰⁶ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 90.

⁴⁰⁷ Lévinas, 90 Lévinas continues: “The tenderness of skin is the very gap between approach and approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality... hence the disorder of caresses, the diachrony, a pleasure

negation of relation but an *ethical spacing* that refuses to resolve into comprehension. It neither settles into full presence nor full absence but remains in motion, suspended between contact and withdrawal.

If vision takes on the structure of the caress, it shifts from comprehension to ethical exposure. This mode of seeing does not fix or assimilate but remains open to what exceeds understanding. It sustains a relation that does not seek to close the gap between self and the Other but instead recognizes disparity as the very condition for an ethical relation.

As discussed in Chapter 5, it is vital to note the indispensability of the body in the turning away from the self and toward the Other.⁴⁰⁸ The Other grips me with an affective resonance, impressing upon the subject a bodily meaning that precedes thought — a sensibility that is *felt* rather than comprehended. This affective encounter destabilizes the subject, calling them into a responsibility that precedes cognition or volition. It is not reducible to involuntary sensation, nor is it an intentional response; rather, it marks a mode of exposure that is inescapable, irreducible, and ethically binding.⁴⁰⁹

The caress is not merely a non-grasping relationality; it sustains difference rather than collapsing it into comprehension. It opens a space of ethical exposure — one that does not aim at fusion or unity but maintains what Lévinas calls an “insurmountable duality of beings”.⁴¹⁰ The caress does not make present, does not thematize, nor does it aim at disclosure. Instead, it solicits what “ceaselessly escapes its form” —not by anticipating a future encounter, but by preserving the Other’s irreducible alterity in the very moment of contact.⁴¹¹ As Lévinas notes in a footnote, “the thematized disappears in the caress, in which

without present, pity, painfulness. Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy and to suffer by the other. But I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other, am signification, because the contact with skin is still a proximity of a face, a responsibility, an obsession with the other, being-one-for-the-other, which is the very birth of signification beyond being.”

⁴⁰⁸ Lévinas writes in *Otherwise than being*, p100-101, “The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple “representation” of a neighbor; it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation - an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment. This anteriority is “older” than the a priori. This formula expresses a way of being affected which can in no way be invested by spontaneity: the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation. We have called this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession. The relationship with exteriority is “prior” to the act that would effect it. For this relationship is not an act, not a thematizing, not a position in the Fichtean sense. Not everything that is in consciousness would be posited by consciousness - contrary to the proposition that seemed to Fichte to be fundamental.”

⁴⁰⁹ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 49.

⁴¹⁰ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 86.

⁴¹¹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257.

thematization becomes proximity.”⁴¹² It is in this space of non-thematization, exposure, and ethical assignation that Lévinas introduces the caress.⁴¹³ The caress does not dissolve boundaries but protects them, sustaining an ethical spacing that neither neutralizes nor assimilates difference, thus preserving the fundamental separation that defines ethical relationality.

6.3 Toward a Caressing gaze

This movement away from the grasp and opening toward ethical exposure opens an important pathway for rethinking vision in ethical terms — not as a means of securing knowledge, but as a form of contact that resists mastery. As Lévinas suggests when he writes that “sight and hearing caress the visible and the audible,” vision itself can take on the structure of the caress: a sensuous proximity that does not possess but remains open to the Other. If vision has historically been structured by epistemic mastery, what would it mean for vision to take on the structure of the caress? Lévinas only briefly gestures toward this possibility in *Otherwise than being*, but what would it mean to take this seriously? To develop the caressing gaze as a way of approaching art and visual culture with ethical hesitation? My proposition is to conceptualize what I call the caressing gaze: a form of seeing that approaches the image without seeking to grasp nor thematize but instead sustains a proximity without appropriation. It is a gaze that remains responsive to what exceeds it and, crucially, respects Glissant’s demand for “the right to opacity”.⁴¹⁴

The caressing gaze is a methodological orientation grounded in Lévinas’ notion of the caress, a non-violent relation that, in his words, “does not know what it seeks”. He emphasizes that this “not knowing,” this “fundamental disorder,” is essential to the caress: “a game

⁴¹² Footnote 10 Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 191.

⁴¹³ Lévinas’ account of the caress — and ethical relation more broadly — develops significantly across his writings. In *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*, the caress is framed through the lens of futurity and ethical desire — a gesture that reaches toward the Other as *à venir*, always beyond grasp, always “still to come.” This is a seeking that never terminates in possession, comprehension, or fulfillment. While this movement outward may appear to mimic the structure of intentionality, Lévinas radically inverts it — desire opens toward an Other whose transcendence remains irreducible. The ethical relation thus affirms and preserves an “insurmountable duality” between self and the Other. In *Otherwise than Being*, this structure shifts: the ethical relation is no longer animated by desire but grounded in sensibility and exposure. Temporality becomes diachronic — the subject is already affected, already responsible, even before recognition or volition. The caress, in this later formulation, reflects this change: no longer reaching-toward, but as a mode of being-gripped by alterity. This shift from desire to substitution, from anticipation to assignation, reshapes the very terms through which responsiveness — including visual responsiveness — can be conceived.

⁴¹⁴ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–90.

absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [à venir].”⁴¹⁵ This non-grasping structure of relation is here transposed into the visual field.⁴¹⁶ In this way, the caressing gaze operates as both an ethical and methodological stance: it is practiced in the act of looking, enacted in the structure of the analysis that follows, and lingers with the visceral—with what stirs before it is known.

Here, Didi-Huberman’s notion of knowing and not-knowing becomes particularly relevant. In *Confronting Images*, Didi-Huberman critiques the art historical tradition after Panofsky, which seeks to excavate images as if they contained definitive meaning.⁴¹⁷ He argues that such a method enacts a “closure of the visible onto the legible,” reducing the image to the domain of the “intelligible” and foreclosing its excess and opacity.⁴¹⁸ For Didi-Huberman, artworks do not function as repositories of meaning but instead operate in a tension between what can be known and remains obscure.⁴¹⁹ Didi-Huberman argues that we must “suspend” our attention in order not to dispossess the work “of its own specific deployment or unfolding”.⁴²⁰ He writes;

It requires, then, a gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognize, to name what it grasps at any cost—but would, first, distance itself a bit and abstain from clarifying everything immediately. Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions, between the grasped visible and the lived ordeal of a relinquishment. There would also be, in this alternative, a dialectical moment—surely unthinkable in positivist terms—consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of letting go of one’s knowledge about it.⁴²¹

Rather than an interpretive act in the hermeneutical sense, where meaning is derived through a pre-established structure of understanding, this suspension refuses the immediate urge to subsume the image into existing epistemic frameworks, not in order to interpret it differently, but to sustain an encounter that resists containment. As Didi-Huberman describes, this entails

⁴¹⁵ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 89.

⁴¹⁶ See also Paul Davies’ discussion of objectless intentionality. Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 265.

⁴¹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 2–4.

⁴¹⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 3.

⁴¹⁹ Didi-Huberman’s criticizes Panofsky’s view of artworks as historically stable documents whose meaning can be excavated. According to Didi-Huberman this approach to art resembles that of an “exorcist” who drives the spirit out of the work. In *Confronting Images* his objective is “to” interrogate the tone of certainty that prevails so often in the beautiful discipline of the history of art.” See the chapter “Questions posed” in *Confronting Images*.

⁴²⁰ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 3, 16, 140.

⁴²¹ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 16.

refraining from seeking to name or categorize an image, but instead “letting oneself be grasped by it instead.”⁴²² This offers a way of thinking about opacity not as an epistemological failure but as a necessary displacement of mastery.

While Lévinas’ ethical relation takes form as a pre-reflective bodily exposure where the subject is called into responsibility before cognition, Didi-Huberman’s not-knowing functions as an epistemic suspension that resists interpretive mastery. My approach brings these two forms of not-knowing into conversation: a caressing gaze must be an ethical openness (Lévinas) and a methodological refusal of totalization (Didi-Huberman), ensuring that the encounter with the artwork holds open an ethical space of difference.

While Didi-Huberman does not frame this suspension of knowledge in ethical terms, I propose that his emphasis on interruption and obscurity, while not itself ethical, opens a methodological space that can be mobilized in ethical terms when reconsidering art and visual culture. Rather than remaining within the realm of interpretation, this suspension, when reconsidered through Lévinas and Glissant, marks an ethical refusal of epistemic mastery. Didi-Huberman’s notion of “suspended attention” resists the closure of meaning by allowing meaning to unfold across “several dimensions.”⁴²³ Yet, while this methodological delay prolongs (open-ended) interpretation, Lévinas and Glissant push beyond mere deferral. For them, opacity is not an interpretive strategy but a fundamental refusal of epistemic mastery.

Whereas Didi-Huberman’s approach delays interpretation, holding it open to preserve multiplicity, opacity — when reframed as an ethical stance— does not merely defer meaning but actively resists totalization. This refusal reconfigures relationality by sustaining an encounter that does not try to fully grasp and assimilate the artwork. Rather than securing knowledge, opacity holds open a space where the artwork is not rendered fully legible but remains in excess of comprehension. This excess is an ethical opening defined by what Lévinas’ describes as “sensitivity — an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in ...proximity” to the Other.⁴²⁴ While Didi-Huberman’s approach remains within a methodological framework, resisting closure while keeping meaning open-ended, Lévinas shifts the stakes entirely, moving from methodological concern to ethical imperative.

⁴²² Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 16, 30, 43.

⁴²³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 16.

⁴²⁴ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 71.

For Lévinas, relinquishing epistemic mastery is a precondition for ethical seeing.⁴²⁵ The encounter with otherness, he argues, is not an act of recognition, but a call that is *felt* rather than cognitively grasped. As David Levin writes, this call is;

.. an obligation to and for the other [that] has always already taken hold of us—through our very flesh. However, this responsibility has not yet been consciously enacted. It is up to us to realize it in the exercise of our freedom⁴²⁶

This implies that vision, if it is to be ethical, must function not as a means of securing knowledge but as an openness to what resists assimilation—an encounter with alterity that cannot be resolved into legibility.⁴²⁷ In this sense, the caressing gaze does not reject meaning outright but engages with the artwork in a way that resists fixation and mastery, refusing the demand that the work resolve into representation coherence. It is a form of being sensually affected—an openness to how we are called upon to engage with the artwork in ways that instantiate and sustain moments of difference. This reconfiguration of vision is particularly crucial in relation to its historical entanglement with mastery and control. As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, Enlightenment thought and its rationalist epistemic not only structured knowledge but also vision, reinforcing a hierarchical relation in which the racialized Other was positioned within a framework of intelligibility shaped by the norms of the colonizer. As Glissant argues, the colonial project imposed an “ideal scale” through which the Other was measured and reduced, making visibility a function of decipherability within the terms of Western thought.⁴²⁸ In this context, ethical vision is not an abstract concern but a necessary intervention in rethinking how we, especially white scholars, can approach art and visual culture shaped by histories of racialized visibility and epistemic violence without reproducing colonial hierarchies.

⁴²⁵ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

⁴²⁶ Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze*, Reprint 2019., 242.

⁴²⁷ In *Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation* (2012), Judith Butler builds on Lévinas understanding of ethical responsibility to argue that certain images solicit a pre-reflexive ethical response. While this perspective aligns with my concern for ethical engagement with images, my focus here is not on how certain images can act upon a viewer to compel such a response, but on how we might ethically approach Orupabo's works through a methodological lens informed by Lévinas, Glissant and Didi-Huberman. An ethical engagement with art and visual culture cannot be contingent on whether they inherently disrupt cognition. Rather, the ethical responsibility lies in the mode of engagement itself, sustaining an openness to opacity, alterity, and excess.

⁴²⁸ Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 107;) Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, with Celia Britton, Glissant Translation Project (University Press, 2021), 190.

Paul Gilroy finds Lévinas' emphasis on the exposed and vulnerable body as the basis of responsibility to be a powerful way of rethinking racial solidarity beyond essentialism. However, while Gilroy argues that Lévinas' ethical model "must be considered because it seems to represent the only ethical response to the conspicuous wrongs that racilogies continue to solicit and sanction." He insists that it must be "rescued from the worst excesses of idealism" by recognizing vulnerability as structurally produced.⁴²⁹ Judith Butler similarly argues, that while Lévinas' centers vulnerability and exposure, he fails to account for how that vulnerability is differentially distributed.⁴³⁰ In positing a universal embodied subject Lévinas' ethics overlooks issues such as race, sexuality, and the lived experience of the body, failing to acknowledge that certain faces are more exposed to violence, certain bodies more vulnerable to erasure, and certain voices are more often silenced. John Drabinski reinforces this critique by explicitly calling for a decolonization of Lévinas. He cautions that Lévinas' claim that "the best way to encounter the Other is to not even take notice of the color of his eyes" risks "conceal[ing] elements of embodied life – and so our vulnerable presence to the world." Such a "suspension," he argues, risks disavowing the racial and historical specificities of bodies made hyper-visible or invisible through violence. For Drabinski, decolonizing Lévinas means placing the "Other and other Others" at the center of ethical thought.⁴³¹

This concern extends to the field of art history but also exposes a tension. As Professor of Art History Darby English argues, there has been a persistent tendency following the struggle for equal opportunities "to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character."⁴³² While English does not deny the political dimensions of Black artistic production, he critiques the impulse to immediately racialize interpretation. He argues that such an approach can function as "a repressive regime targeting the work's right to difference," that constrains interpretation in advance, reinforcing a segregating logic rather than expanding the possibilities for interpretation.⁴³³ These critiques do not invalidate a Lévinasian approach but sharpen its stakes. They compel us to ask: how can an ethics of openness and non-mastery engage with

⁴²⁹ Gilroy as quoted in Drabinski, "Vernacular Solidarity," 177–78.

⁴³⁰ Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 147.

⁴³¹ Drabinski, "Incarnate Historiography and the Problem of Method," 40–44.

⁴³² Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2007), 6.

⁴³³ English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 9.

artworks such as Frida Orupabo's without collapsing them into a fixed racial framework or disavow the histories that make such frameworks necessary?

While the caressing gaze is grounded in Lévinas' account of sensibility as exposure and vulnerability, it departs from his refusal to situate the ethical relation within history. Lévinas insists that responsibility arises in a rupture that precedes ontology, culture, and social formation. Yet as these critiques make clear, any approach to images and artworks shaped by colonial violence and racial legibility must address how the viewer is already historically positioned. Rather than resolving this tension, I deliberately hold it open: the caressing gaze is ethically stirred in the moment of the encounter, but that encounter is always mediated by histories of visual mastery and differential vulnerability. My methodology therefore draws on Lévinas to articulate an ethical openness, while insisting that such openness must remain accountable to the very histories' Lévinas' leaves unspoken. Holding this tension, the caressing gaze sustains an ethical space of difference that resists mastery without disavowing context.

Didi-Huberman's knowing - not-knowing provides a methodological response to this tension. He resists the positivist art historical tendency to impose totalizing knowledge onto images, instead advocating for an interpretive practice that sustains openness and epistemic humility. However, this refusal of mastery must not be mistaken for disengagement. As Mieke Bal observes: "According to the performative conception of art, art participates in the political. It does not simply represent it; rather than merely critiquing, it intervenes."⁴³⁴ To engage Orupabo's work through a Lévinasian lens, then, is not to retreat from its political dimensions but to recognize that its impact unfolds in the visceral encounter, rather than being prefigured by external interpretive frameworks. Knowing-not-knowing is a reorientation of critical inquiry that resists predetermined frameworks of meaning and sustains openness in the encounter. This is not merely a suspension of knowledge but an ethical openness where we engage the work with 'nude' eyes, where proximity does not collapse into possession, where one lingers with what exceeds comprehension.

⁴³⁴ Henrik Gustafsson and Asbjørn Grønstad, *Ethics and Images of Pain*, Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies (Routledge, 2012), 1:138.

6.4 Method in Practice: The Caressing Gaze as Visual Ethics

How, then, can vision be rendered more receptive to the singular, the ambiguities, complexities, inconsistencies? This would entail *a shifting of optics* from a detached and analytical gaze to one that imbricates the viewer, rendering them vulnerable. Although Lévinas opens vision toward sensibility, it remains bound to a relational structure that still assumes a distance between the self and the Other. For this reason, Lévinas turns to embodied sensibility, not as the tactile palpitation of the grasp, but as a mode of “caressing” proximity in which the subject is no longer a sovereign perceiver but is already affected and exposed to the Other’s demand. This shift unsettles the certainty of perception by grounding vision in vulnerability. Here, the ethical subject is not constituted by the artwork but is already ethically implicated *before* the act of seeing. The artwork does not generate the ethical demand itself, but may call it forth, intensify it, or bring it into awareness. To look ethically, then, is to respond from within a structure of responsibility that precedes the viewing situation, a structure through which the artwork may provoke or ethically stir the viewer. In practice, this changes how we approach the artwork temporally and interpretively.

This mode of relation that moves beyond vision’s lingering epistemological framework and toward a more immediate, embodied encounter. This reorientation signals a fundamental shift; relationality is no longer structured through seeing at a distance, but through a contact that unsettles the certainty of perception – reconfiguring vision as an embodied, sensual, and affective mode of engagement rather than as the primary ontological means of relating to the world.⁴³⁵ Indeed, the mode of looking that Lévinas opens toward is not a detached or reductive, like the visual regimes that structured the colonial archives, but rather an embodied and proximate way of seeing in which we arrive at vision through the body, *through the caress*. Lévinas articulates this shift when he states:

In starting with *touching*, interpreted not as palpation but as caress, and *language*, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact, we have tried to describe *proximity* as irreducible to consciousness and thematization.⁴³⁶

The caressing gaze, then, is less a prescriptive method, but an ethical and visual orientation that must be developed in proximity to each artwork. In the analyses that follow, this gaze will unfold through close engagement with the specific visual, affective, and differential

⁴³⁵ Davies, “The Face and the Caress,” 252–72.

⁴³⁶ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 80.

embodied conditions that shape each work. It remains open to what each work reveals, withholds, or renders obscure — responding not by resolving, but by holding space for what exceeds comprehension and resists relational closure. Grounded in a commitment to opacity in the Glissant’s sense, the caressing gaze offers one way of approaching artworks shaped by colonial visual regimes without reinscribing their logic of mastery.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94.

6.4 The cut as Aesthetic and Ethical form

In the following, I examine the cut as a *material* and *ethical form*. While the cut inevitably intersects with epistemic, affective, and temporal registers, I treat these as consequences of its material and ethical structuring rather than independent domains that the cut organizes or constrains. Building on this formal distinction, I argue that Frida Orupabo's cut can be read as a material intervention that disrupts the conditions under which form coheres. In doing so, it refuses the fixing demand for representational coherence and the regimes of mediation, and epistemic mastery through which colonial visual regimes operate.

The following sections primarily address my second research question: *What is the relation between ethics and form in Frida Orupabo's work?* It unfolds through three interrelated strands: a situated theoretical framing of cutting as aesthetic and ethical operation, the formal analysis of Orupabo's practice, and a discussion of opacity as it emerges through Orupabo's formal disruptions. Rather than advancing a singular ethical model, these sections examine how Orupabo's cut orients relation differently, not through the production of new forms of visual legibility or relational coherence, but by suspending meaning and resisting stabilization. In this sense, Orupabo's cut operates as an ethical refusal of relation premised on transparency and understanding as its precondition. Instead, it preserves difference as difference, rather than subsuming it into comparison or recognition, resonating with Édouard Glissant's notion of the "right to opacity."⁴³⁸

As discussed in Chapter 3, particularly section 3.1.7, photography was appropriated during the colonial era as a technique of classification and control, fixing racialized subjects into the appearance of coherence, or what colonial administrators took to be "essence."⁴³⁹ Cutting into these visual representations reopens the question of how visual meaning is structured, secured, and reconfigured. Does cutting into colonial era images merely fragment the photograph, or can it intervene in the visual regime in which photography was both constituted and constitutive? Rather than reconfiguring representation toward new forms of legibility or relational coherence, I argue that Orupabo's cut suspends meaning and withholds the fragment from assimilation into narrative, archival, or relational resolution. This suspension does not negate engagement. It reorients it, insisting on opacity as a condition for

⁴³⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

⁴³⁹ Stoler, "Prologue in Two Parts," 4.

relation —without domination— and by destabilizing dominant Western epistemic assumptions that relation depends upon comprehension. As I will argue throughout this chapter, existing theories of cutting and ethical form, such as those proposed by media theorists Sarah Kember and Joana Zylinksa, as well as by Asbjørn Grønstad, do not fully account for this operation. They ultimately retain a commitment to mediation, or representational address that Orupabo's practice actively resists.

It is useful to distinguish between two recurrent modes of cutting in Orupabo's work. In her hinged collages, fragments are cut from their original context and subsequently layered and pinned so that one fragment slightly lifts or protrudes over another, producing what I later theorize as the *three-dimensional cut*. This mode of cutting introduces spatial instability, creating hinge-like articulations that unsettle the coherence of the re-presented body and the image's representational ground, producing what might be described as a non-site between the photographic body and the constructed body of the collage.⁴⁴⁰ The second mode, which I call the *juxtapositional cut*, is employed primarily in her digital and multi-paneled configurations where fragments drawn from different temporal, cultural, and visual contexts are positioned adjacent to one another. Here, the tension arises not from material rupture but from the unresolved proximity between visually incongruent image fragments.

Orupabo reuses fragments across platforms and compositions, ensuring that the photographic fragment does not settle into fixed meaning but remains contingent and open to transformation. In what follows, I examine how these two cutting strategies, and her reuse of image fragments across platforms and works, function as epistemic, aesthetic, and ethical interventions that resist the colonial demand for visual mastery.

6.4.1 Cutting as epistemic and aesthetic intervention

To grasp the implications of Orupabo's intervention into the colonial archive, it is necessary to consider cutting not simply as an act of rupture or destruction, but as a process that reshapes how images operate. In *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* media theorists Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska theorize cutting as a *process of differentiation*,

⁴⁴⁰ I made a similar observation in my master thesis. Melby, "Skin of memory," 28.

rather than a finite intervention. For them, the cut is an ongoing act of mediation that selects, recombines, and generates new relations, shaping how images unfold across time rather than resolving them into fixed meaning.⁴⁴¹

Their notion of the *differential cutting* provides a useful point of departure for considering Orupabo's repeated recontextualization of image fragments across different platforms and works. Within Kember and Zylinska's framework, cutting is not just a disruption but a *generative act* that temporarily stabilizes meaning within an ongoing process of mediation.⁴⁴² Cutting, in this sense, remains tied to relationality and meaning-production, even as it resists closure. It is precisely here that Orupabo's practice diverges. While her cut similarly unfolds cutting as an ongoing process, her cuts do not stabilize meaning, even provisionally. Rather, Orupabo's cutting resists the demand for stabilization that renders the image governable, as a tool of racial containment and control. Here, cutting persists as an open, contingent gesture that withholds resolution and resists closure.

This recurrence becomes particularly evident in the recurrence of image fragments such as the hands, neck, and lower facial features across works such as the two "*Untitled*", 2018, collages. The repetitive use of image fragments does not function as visual anchors that secure meaning over time, but as signs of an ongoing cutting process in which fragments remain mobile and unsettled. Often loosely pinned, the fragments appear held in place without being integrated into a coherent whole, foregrounding their material instability and their resistance to compositional resolution. In this way, Orupabo's reuse of image fragments is more than an aesthetic strategy, it functions as an active extension of the cut, across multiple works and both digital and material platforms, ensuring that meaning is never fixed but remains unsettled over time.⁴⁴³ This practice will be explored further in section 6.4.9 and in 7.5 where I examine how recurrence not only reinforces Orupabo's refusal of stabilization

⁴⁴¹ Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (MIT Press, 2012), xix, xixiii, 75–76.

⁴⁴² Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, xix, xixiii, 75–76, 187. My reading of Kember and Zylinska's notion of "differential cutting" aligns with Asbjørn Grønstad's interpretation, where the cut is described as "a creative, generative gesture that introduces new values into the world." He draws on Kember and Zylinska formulation of cutting as a non-mimetic act that intervenes and transforms "the existing fabric of the world." While "the practice of cutting is not mimetic in itself," Grønstad emphasizes that "the ethics it engenders still maintains a relation with the sphere of representation." See Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, p 7.

⁴⁴³ Orupabo's fragments do not always recur identically. In some cases, she adjusts tonal values, contrast, color, or clarity, subtly altering the fragment's appearance.

but also disrupts the indexicality of archival images, further resisting the visual code that structure the colonial archive.

6.4.2 From mediations to opacity: The Ethics of the cut

Orupabo's cut does not only challenge the stabilizing logic of the colonial archive discussed in Chapter 3 but also raises broader ethical questions about how images mediate history, presence, and absence. If cutting in Kember and Zylinska's framework remains tied to meaning-production through temporary stabilization, Orupabo's cut insists on an ethical mode of engagement where meaning is never fully settled. In what follows, I examine how her intervention into colonial images can be seen as opening up an ethical space in which difference is not resolved into visual legibility.⁴⁴⁴ This refusal of fixity unfolds across both her physical collages and her digital practice. In doing so, it gestures toward an ethical mode of relationality, one that does not seek to grasp but respects Glissant's demand for the "right to Opacity."⁴⁴⁵

Using photography as their example, Kember and Zylinska conceptualize cutting not merely as a disruption of an image but as a process that actively reshapes its possibilities, altering how it relates to time, meaning, and interpretation. Their discussion presents cutting as both a technical and ontological operation — "an ontological entity encapsulating something that is, or something that is taking place" as well as an "ethical imperative."⁴⁴⁶ Informed by Lévinas' notion of responsibility, drawing on process philosophy and Karen Barad's notion of the agential cut, they frame cutting as an intervention that carries with it the ethical obligation to "cut well."⁴⁴⁷ However, their account remains tethered to an ethics of mediation: cutting still stabilizes meaning within an ongoing process of differentiation "it is a causal procedure that performs the division of the world into [graspable] entities, but it is also an act of decision with regard to the boundaries of those entities."⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁴ For a discussion of the use of photography during the colonial era, see Chapter 3, particularly section 3.1.7.

⁴⁴⁵ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–90.

⁴⁴⁶ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 71.

⁴⁴⁷ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 71, 81–82, 89.

⁴⁴⁸ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 79–82, 89 While Kember and Zylinska draw on Levinas to ground responsibility in openness to alterity, their ethics of mediation nonetheless presumes a temporary

Pace Kember and Zylinska, I argue that Orupabo's cutting refuses the demand for stabilization of meaning as a condition for ethical mediation. Formally, this can be seen in her hinged collages, where the three-dimensional cut prevents the image from settling into representational coherence, suspending the image between surface and depth, unity, and fragmentation. This disruption of pictorial coherence and stabilization is further extended in her re-use of fragments across works and platforms. Her cut does not function as an act of ethical re-mediation but as a more radical form of interruption that resists epistemic mastery, in particular the archival and scientific visual regimes that sought to classify, stabilize, and fully know the Other. It holds open *an ethical space in difference* that withholds the colonial image's claim to representational transparency.⁴⁴⁹

While Kember and Zylinska recognize the ethical implications in how images, subjects, and technologies are continually shaped through differentiation, their framing of the cut remains tethered to an ethics of mediation — one that actively produces new relations, meaning, and temporalities rather than resisting them. They argue that differential cutting is more than an “in-cision;” it is a creative and critical intervention that both intervenes in and actively reshapes representation.⁴⁵⁰ More than simply dividing or isolating, the differential cut functions processually, producing open-ended connections.⁴⁵¹

Kember and Zylinska's emphasis on relationality and meaning-making production differs from the rupturing force of Orupabo's cut, which does not solely reconfigure representation but opens an ethical space of opacity where difference remains unresolved.⁴⁵² This space refuses epistemic mastery while unsettling the very terms of relationality. In this way,

stabilization of meaning through descision and differentiation, a move that departs from Levinas' insistence on responsibility as arising prior to comprehension and beyond (albeit articulated in relation to the human Other) .

⁴⁴⁹ Kember and Zylinska understand the cut as both a technical gesture and an ethical imperative —“a technique” and “a command” to intervene responsibly within mediation (2012, 71-73). Their ethics of the cut remains entangled in meaning-production: it is a call to “cut well”, to reconfigure matter, time, and relations through differential mediation. In contrast, Orupabo's cut, as I argue here, is not structured toward production of meaning but enacts a more radical interruption —suspending epistemic mastery and sustaining opacity as an ethical form.

⁴⁵⁰ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 17–18, 79–81, 170–71 Kember and Zylinska's emphasis on differentiation remains tied to meaning-making production, whereas Orupabo's cut refuses the imperative to stabilize meaning. Her work shifts the focus from structuring new relations to maintaining an unresolved presence that resists epistemic mastery.

⁴⁵¹ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 71-75,81.

⁴⁵² While Kember and Zylinska invoke “the horizon of duration” to avoid the finality of a single decisive cut, their framework still assumes the temporary fixing of forms within each moment of meditation. This stabilization is necessary for meaning making, precisely what Orupabo's practice suspends rather than resolves. See Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 82-85

Orupabo's intervention does not offer an alternative mediation; rather, it destabilizes mediation itself as a representational logic premised on legibility, coherence, and production of stable meaning. In doing so, it holds open a space that is unproductive in epistemological or classificatory terms but instead sustains an affective and ethical encounter grounded in irreducible difference. It refuses legibility and the epistemic demands to render the Other knowable. More precisely, Orupabo's cut produces a mode of provisionality and non-fixity at the level of form, though this provisionality does not manifest itself equally across works and platforms. Importantly, this ethical orientation does not rest on recognition or comparison, but on how the cut structures the encounter itself toward a perpetual conceptual openness, thereby exceeding the limits of Kember and Zylinska's proposed ethical intervention.

Indeed, Orupabo's cut does not operate within an ethics-of meaning making or relational mediation, but foregrounds opacity, withholding, and the irreducibility of difference. Her intervention into historical and contemporary visual material structures a non-violent relation, a relation that does not seek to grasp and possess the Other and that resonates with the openness of the caress. This refusal is particularly significant in the context of racialized image-making practices, where the visual has historically served as a site of classification, capture, and control.⁴⁵³ Against the colonial imperative to fix racialized subjects into knowable, legible forms, Orupabo's cut intervenes by fragmenting and suspending visual meaning, dislocating the body from its archival function and opening a space of indeterminacy and irreducibility —what Glissant calls the “right to opacity.”⁴⁵⁴ In this space, the subject or artwork resists epistemic capture and cannot be reduced to stable meaning.

6.4.3 Cutting as ethical responsibility

In the previous section, I argued that Orupabo's cut constitutes a conceptual departure from Kember and Zylinska's ethics of mediation. While they frame cutting as a differential process that generates meaning and relation, Orupabo's cut refuses epistemic legibility and mastery, a refusal that cannot be severed from her engagement with images drawn from the colonial archive. I return to a question they raise: how does one “cut well”?⁴⁵⁵ This raises a further

⁴⁵³ See my discussion in Chapter 3.

⁴⁵⁴ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–90.

⁴⁵⁵ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 82.

question: might Orupabo's practice enact a different framework of responsibility that does not rely on epistemic clarity, but responds to the visual violence of the colonial archive through refusal? As I have argued, Orupabo's cut does not eliminate presence but withholds it from interpretive mastery. This withholding reconfigures the terms of relation —terms that resist the colonial demand for transparency and the ethical violence of comprehension.⁴⁵⁶

While Kember and Zylinska describe cutting as an ontological and epistemological process fundamental to how we engage with matter, a process that grounds their ethical framework, their formulation does not fully account for a cut that exceeds differentiation, functioning as a mode of refusal that insists on opacity as a condition for an ethical relation. As they argue;

Cutting reality into small pieces—with our eyes, our bodily and cognitive apparatus, our language, our memory, and our technologies—we enact separation and relationality as the two dominant aspects of material locatedness in time.⁴⁵⁷

While this description captures the processual nature of cutting, it presumes that ethical relations emerge through differentiation itself, through the production of separations and relations that remain intelligible. As Glissant has argued, such epistemic conditions reduce difference to what can be measured, compared, and assimilated to hegemonic norms.⁴⁵⁸ In their instrumentalized colonial form, they sought to reduce racialized subjects to fully knowable and homogenous others.⁴⁵⁹ Seen this way, Orupabo's cut is not purely an act of differentiation, but a response to the epistemic violence of the colonial archive. It withholds clarity, instead opening an ethical relation that does not yield to the colonial gaze's imperative of readability.

If cutting is inescapable, as Kember and Zylinska argue, this returns us to the question: *how does one cut well?* Kember and Zylinska suggest that cutting is an ethical decision that carries with it responsibility in shaping the way we relate to the world.⁴⁶⁰ This framing is particularly relevant to Orupabo's work, where cutting is not only a formal technique but a way of negotiating selfhood in relation to historical violence.⁴⁶¹ While Kember and Zylinska

⁴⁵⁶ For a fuller discussion of Glissant's critique of Enlightenment rationality and his articulation of opacity as a counter to the colonial demand for transparency, see Chapter 4.

⁴⁵⁷ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 75.

⁴⁵⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

⁴⁵⁹ See Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of Glissant's critique of Enlightenment epistemology and his articulation of opacity as a mode of resistance to colonial transparency.

⁴⁶⁰ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 71, 82–83.

⁴⁶¹ In an interview with Akinkugbe, Orupabo describes collage as "something liberating, something very closely linked to creating a sustaining one's own self." This relation is particularly relevant to her

theorize ethical cutting as a series of “pragmatic in-cisions, ” —situated interventions that remain productive of relation and meaning— Orupabo’s cut operates differently, suspending rather than recalibrating mediation.⁴⁶² Their metric for “cutting well” entails keeping open what they call the “horizon of duration” —a Bergsonian conception of time as creative and continuously unfolding.⁴⁶³ Orupabo’s cut, by contrast, enacts an ethics of opacity: grounded in withholding rather than communicative intent. Following Kember and Zylinska, every “in-cision” carries the ethical weight of a “de-cision.”⁴⁶⁴ Yet while their framework orients cutting toward relation and generative transformation, Orupabo’s practice displaces this logic, the force of her cut lies in suspending the movement toward stabilization. It is not structured by mediation or generative continuity, but by a refusal of containment and an insistence on unresolved presence. Whereas Kember and Zylinska’s generative continuity orients the cut toward “cultural significance”, however provisional, Orupabo’s cut rejects this imperative, since such significance is tethered to the violence of comprehension, opening instead onto a mode of relation that refuses semantic stabilization.⁴⁶⁵

Rather than resolving into a stable narrative or coherent readability, Orupabo’s cut sustains a space of tension, in which meaning remains unresolved and presence is not representationally stabilized but instead registers as an affective and ethical “unknowable” presence encountered within the visual field.

The temporality her cut produces —and that I will return to in depth in Section 6.5 and 7.3— is not solely aligned with futurity but engages interruption and recurrence. It refuses to “contain” the wounds of history; instead, insisting on what cultural theorist Fred Moten describes as the *ongoing presence of the past* rather than its containment within historical closure.⁴⁶⁶ In this context, cutting well does not mean enabling relationality or generative potential, but refusing the demand for narrative, and by extension historical, resolution. This

practice, where cutting is not only a formal technique but a way of negotiating selfhood in relation to historical violence. See Akinkugbe, “Frida Orupabo, the Artist Reconfiguring Colonial Legacies Through Collage.”

⁴⁶²Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 171.

⁴⁶³ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 82.

⁴⁶⁴Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 171.

⁴⁶⁵ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 23.

⁴⁶⁶ Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1, 188–89.

refusal is not an absence of ethical engagement, but a reconfiguration of what ethical response can be within the conditions of racialized visibility and archival violence.

This refusal of fixity —particularly of the racialized subject— primarily manifests itself through what I term the three-dimensional cut where layering and pinning introduces spatial instability and affective tension. By introducing a three-dimensional aspect, Orupabo's collages refuse the flattening effect of the photographic frame, which in racialized dynamics was exploited to stabilize and contain the subject into static, knowable forms and reinforce hierarchical ways of seeing.⁴⁶⁷ Rather than presenting a unified, seamless surface, the collaged body emerges through hinged and layered photographic fragments that produce a sculptural quality that opens a site of uncertainty. Seen this way, Orupabo three-dimensional cut can be understood as extending, and radicalizing, the earlier photomontage strategies of Hannah Höch. As discussed in Section 3.2.3 Höch made cuts and edges visible, emphasizing what Toussaint describes as “boundaries and dividing lines; disruption; contrast; fragmentation [and] inconsistency” thereby foregrounding the representational systems and ideological constructs of Self and Other within the postcolonial context of the Weimar Republic.⁴⁶⁸ Orupabo builds on this strategy but shifts it from surface of the image into space itself, introducing a spatial articulation that transforms the cut from a surface intervention into a bodily and sculptural disturbance. The resulting compositions recall articulated paper puppets, their joints suggesting latent possibilities for movement and reconfiguration: Within the material body of the collage, we encounter both the “real” of the photographic image and the constructed body assembled through cutting and layering. At their intersections, a non-site emerges: one fragment slightly overlaps another, forcing the former to protrude outward, endowing the collage with a bodily, thing-like presence —hinged, wounded, and potentially animated. Presence is asserted in the cuts and gaps, where the fragmented body quivers on the verge of animation, resisting stabilization within the visual field.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ For an extended discussion of how photography was instrumentalized to stabilize and contain racialized subjects as legible, knowable forms, see Chapter 3.

⁴⁶⁸ Toussaint, “Dismantling Colonial Representation,” 33.

⁴⁶⁹ In my master thesis “Skin of memory” (2021) I noted that the articulated joints of Orupabo's collages open up a site of “instability and uncertainty.” I also connected these sites to the potential for movement and animation (p 24-25). Awa Konaté echoed this observation in her essay “Frida Orupabo,” in *Deutsche Börse* (London: The Photography Foundation Prize 2023) where she writes that “the metal pins,” in Orupabo's collages, “suggest instability, motion and transformation.”

In these layered compositions, meaning remains contingent, and opacity asserts itself as a mode of presence rather than a condition of mediation. This shift transforms the cut from a generative differentiation into an interruption that unsettles epistemic mastery. Put differently, Kember and Zylinska frame differential cutting as a generative process through which meaning and relationality continually emerge, Orupabo's practice resists fixation entirely, creating an ethical space in difference that refuses to render the subject entirely knowable.⁴⁷⁰

The refusal to render a fully knowable and stabilized subject is not exhausted in the singular act of cutting. It is sustained through Orupabo's extensive reuse of image fragments across works and platforms, ensuring that the cut remains an *ongoing negotiation* rather than a finite intervention. In this sense, her practice not only disrupts re-presentations of racialized individuals but continually unsettles the epistemological, ideological, and material foundations of the visual regimes that structure their visibility. While Kember and Zylinska frame cutting as a process of mediation that structures meaning through acts of selection, omission, and recombination, Orupabo's approach extends beyond mediation. It moves toward a more radical form of opacity, refusing the archival imperative to fix time into coherent narrative structures. In contrast, their "differential cut" functions processually to sustain open-ended meaning-making.⁴⁷¹

Orupabo's cut keeps resolution in suspension, resisting even a temporary stabilization of meaning. This is a refusal that, in Moten's terms, insists on the *ongoing presence of the past* rather than its containment within historical closure.⁴⁷² In other words, where Kember and Zylinska position the cut as method of (re)structuring meaning, Orupabo's cut functions as an intervention that refuses stabilization of meaning.⁴⁷³ At the same time, cutting is not only an ethical decision but also a material intervention. Kember and Zylinska suggest that cutting, as a "creative practice, can alter reality by intervening in it on a material level;" however, where

⁴⁷⁰ Although Kember and Zylinska foreground the provisional nature of meaning within a process of mediation, this instability does not amount to opacity in the Glissantian sense. Instability still presupposes interpretive legibility and cultural significance, however temporary. In contrast, opacity names a refusal to yield to the Cartesian habit of mind and its insistence on full transparency, a divergence central to Orupabo's practice. This argument will be further developed in Chapter 7, particularly in "Collective Portraits", where I examine how her methods of cutting and layering materially enact the refusal of the scientific and colonial gaze's imperative to fix and classify the subject.

⁴⁷¹ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 80–81.

⁴⁷² Moten, *In The Break*, 188–89.

⁴⁷³ One might argue that Orupabo also sustains what Kember and Zylinska describe as "the horizon of duration", yet she does so by exceeding their generative framework: her practice holds open the wounds of the past, ensuring that they are not foreclosed by the imposition of narrative stability.

their model emphasizes mediation, Orupabo's practice foregrounds opacity as a condition of relation. Cutting, however, does not guarantee transformation: rather than ensuring rupture, it opens the possibility of change and of "making a difference that matters".⁴⁷⁴ This tension between intervention and repetition exists in Orupabo's collages; her cuts do not obliterate colonial images but transform them, insisting on the unresolved afterlives of slavery and colonialism —what Orupabo describes as "the interaction and clash between past and present."⁴⁷⁵

6.4.4 Temporal Disturbances: Extending the Cut Beyond the Photographic Frame

While Kember and Zylinska position differential cutting as a process that reshapes photographic temporality from within mediation, Orupabo's practice extends the cut beyond the photographic frame and into time itself. Her collages construct a mode of temporal disturbance in which historical and contemporary fragments are held in unresolved proximity. This disturbance is not only formal but ethical: it refuses historical closure and resists stabilizing narratives through which violence is typically contained within the past.

This nonlinear and recursive temporality primarily manifests through what I term the *juxtapositional cut*. Through this compositional strategy Orupabo brings fragments from distinct temporalities into forced proximity, where the visual and historical incongruity between fragments generate temporal friction. Through this strategy, Orupabo refuses historical closure and keeps the past in unresolved proximity to the present. While Kember and Zylinska discuss cutting within the context of photographic mediation, Orupabo's intervention moves beyond a single photographic frame, expanding the cut into a spatial and material reconfiguration. Her use of juxtaposition holds images drawn from historical,

⁴⁷⁴ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 72, 82 They write: "There is no guarantee that temporary outcomes of any such ongoing performative processes will be critical and transformative rather than just repetitive and conformist. But it is this possibility of emergence of such transformations and inventions, of making a difference that matters, that can turn this creative media project from the theater of mere form to an ethicopolitical performance."

⁴⁷⁵ Jareh Das, "BOMB Magazine | New Readings, New Meanings: Frida Orupabo Interviewed," *BOMB Magazine*, n.d., accessed September 24, 2024, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/double-consciousness-collages-frida-orupabo-interviewed/>.

contemporary, and illustrative contexts in unresolved tension.⁴⁷⁶ This formal strategy sustains a fractured, spatio-temporal structure in which historical images are reactivated through their proximity to more contemporary and illustrative imagery. As Orupabo explains, her use of historical images in combination with more contemporary visual material is “a way of connecting the past with the here and now,” revealing how violent histories “still affect[t] and infor[m] our lives...there are no clean brakes, history repeats..”⁴⁷⁷

In *Cloud of confusion* (2024), twelve image fragments — both black and white and color— are arranged in a monumental 4x3 grid. The title of the work references a 1964 U.S Department of Defense film.⁴⁷⁸ The film documents the effects of the chemical agent 3-quinuclidinyl benzilate, which induces symptoms of rapid pulse, blurred vision, delirium, and hallucinations —symptoms that mirror the collages jarring structure. Like the 1964 film, *Cloud of confusion* (Figure 3) uses compositional techniques that evoke perceptual instability and cognitive disruption.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁶ While both compositional strategies resonate with aspects of Kember and Zylinska’s notion of the differential cut, I argue later that Orupabo’s method extends their model. Whereas differential cutting, as theorized by Kember and Zylinska and taken up by Asbjørn Grønstad in his reading of J. Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (a single-channel film), emphasizes the generation of new relations and the redistribution of meaning, Orupabo’s reuse of fragments across multiple platforms and works, refusing stabilization. Her cut holds fragments in a state of continuous unsettlement, resisting even provisional reconfiguration. In this sense, Orupabo radicalizes the processual ethics of differential cutting by sustaining the fragment’s contingency.

⁴⁷⁷ Akinkugbe, “Frida Orupabo, the Artist Reconfiguring Colonial Legacies Through Collage.”

⁴⁷⁸ Orupabo also references the title of the film in an Instagram post dated August 3, 2023

⁴⁷⁹ Yuvinka Medina and Martin Owen, “Introduction,” in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (Skira, n.d.), 14.



Figure 3: Frida Orupabo, *Cloud of Confusion*, 2024. 12 prints on photo paper, mounted on aluminum, 60×60 cm each. Photograph: Ingvild K. Melby.

While the grid suggests compositional order, it is destabilized by the dissonant temporalities of the image fragments. Archival, contemporary, and illustrative fragments collide in a visual field where temporal markers are suggested through tone and content but rarely resolved; staging an uneasy proximity between past and present that never coheres into narrative. Several of the images foreground the dark-skinned body as an object of scrutiny, but without granting full personhood. They are partial, decontextualized, and visually restrained — seen in angles that evoke medical inspection, colonial documentation, or disciplinary control. One tightly cropped image shows an open mouth, conjuring associations of medical inspection or sexual violence; another depicts a wound, its skin pulled apart by a finger. A third image is of a white surface punctuated by what appears to be a sharp object. Taken together, these fragments evoke a persistence sense of bodily vulnerability and precarity, where wounds, whether literal or symbolic, mark the racialized and gendered body as exposed to a colonial visual regime.

This regime oscillates between scientific scrutiny and racial-sexual fetishization, each mode reducing the subject to a bodily surface open to inspection. The work's wounded and exposed

bodily fragments are abruptly countered by images drawn from incongruous visual and cultural registers, producing a dissonant and affectively charged visual field. A cartoon figure, likely one of Disney's *Three little Pigs* (1933), clutches his hat with a worried expression, evoking a childlike register of fear and vulnerability. Originally a part of a Depression-era fable about self-reliance and impending threat, the pig's presence heightens the collage's dissonance, its naive narrative logic and nostalgic tone clashes with the surrounding images of subjugated, fragmented bodies. The words "Dirty Dirt" scrawled on a hoodie in contemporary looking font, suggests shame and denigration.⁴⁸⁰ A tightly cropped image of a woman's groin, clad in a glittery lurex bodysuit and adorned with a synthetic pubic-like tuft, amplifies the collages tension between fetishization, parody, and exposure.

While some of the images carry identifiable timestamps; such as the cartoon pig from 1933, a hoodie dated to 1999 —many of Orupabo's fragments resist dating altogether. In conversation, Orupabo has suggested that the metadata attached to the images is often unreliable or ideological tainted, which prompts her to withhold contextual data.⁴⁸¹ The data, she explains, risks reasserting the original framing imposed by the colonial archive, fixing the subject in place within a controlling and objectifying gaze that her work seeks to unsettle. As she has commented in an interview with Elvira Dyangani Ose:

There's something about removing the subject from the context and everything attached to it. The subjects are placed, they are undressed or dressed – they are defined from the outside.⁴⁸²

Although Orupabo has repeatedly stated that she predominantly works with colonial imagery, her work is not limited to officially designated historical material. Indeed, her sourcing strategy rarely involves visiting officially designated archives; instead, she finds images online, where they often circulate in fragmentary, decontextualized forms.⁴⁸³ As she explains,

⁴⁸⁰ The observation made about the compositional structure of the film in relation to the collage was also made by Yuvinka Medina and Owen Martin in the exhibition catalogue *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* p 14. The fragment with the text "Dirty Dirt" was first posted on Orupabo's Instagram account @nemiepeba on 26 August 2021 with a caption that directs the viewer to Deborah Luster's photographic work "One big self –Prisoners of Luisiana" (1998-2002) on the predominantly black Louisiana prison population. The fragment itself is a partial image of the image "Dirty Dirt" (1999) See: ["Dirty Dirt," Angola, Louisiana by Deborah Luster](#)

⁴⁸¹ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 8 October 2024. This statement was subsequently confirmed in correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

⁴⁸² Orupabo, "Hours After," 7.

⁴⁸³ Orupabo, "Hours After," 6.

the crucial element in her selection process is the *feel of the image*, not its provenance, but whether it resonates with the legacy of the colonial or speaks to it in some way.⁴⁸⁴

This sensibility recalls a formulation by Ghanaian-born British filmmaker John Akomfrah who describes his work on *The Nine Muses*, *Vertigo Sea* and *Tropikos* as a dialogue between “different archival forms.”⁴⁸⁵ Some images, he noted, are not “officially designated as archival,” such as library footage; others are newly shot but infused with what he describes as a desire “to bear some trace or elements of the past”.⁴⁸⁶ He elaborates:

With *The Nine Muses* and *Vertigo Sea* there is an attempt to generate a dialogue between different archival forms, not just the images that are officially designated as ‘archival’, such as library footage. I was trying to wrestle with *how one insinuates a notion of the archival*. A lot of the sequences with *Vertigo Sea* and *The Nine Muses* are infused with the desire, in the original shot material, to bear some trace or elements of the past. With *Tropikos*, it was not possible to use archive, so I tried to have the dialogue within the frame, to retain some notion of the archival, so that the archival and the present can *sit easily with each other*. *Tropikos* was informed by my reading of *The Tempest* especially, and by images of black people in Western painting of the time. I read quite a lot about 17th and 18th century painting. In this way some archival traces are evident in the original material. So there’s a migration towards the past and the present within the same frame.⁴⁸⁷

Although Orupabo’s similarly works with images that “bear some trace or elements of the past,” the results are markedly different. Where Akomfrah seeks to create a slow “migration” between temporalities, allowing the archival and the contemporary to “*sit easily with each other*,” —Orupabo’s juxtapositional cut resists such ease. Instead, her juxtapositional cut produces an affectively charged temporal friction. It forces dissonant temporalities into proximity, not to unify them, but to expose their interrelations and tensions.

Yet even as these different temporal registers clash, something passes between them.⁴⁸⁸ In *Cloud of confusion* (2024), Orupabo juxtaposes a relatively contemporary image fragment — traceable to 1999 — with another image of a young Black person’s head and a neck, slightly bowed and marked by what appears to be a scar from a knife wound. Cropped closely and

⁴⁸⁴ Frida Orupabo, Studio conversation with author, 8 October 2024. This statement was subsequently confirmed in correspondence to the author 26.02 2026.

⁴⁸⁵ My objective here is not to undertake a detailed analysis of John Akomfrah’s work but to draw out relevant points of divergence that help frame the formal and epistemic stakes of Orupabo’s practice.

⁴⁸⁶ Austin Thomas, *Temporal Vertigo: An Interview with John Akomfrah – Senses of Cinema*, Senses of Cinema, December 10, 2012, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2016/feature-articles/john-akomfrah-interview/> my italic.

⁴⁸⁷ Thomas, *Temporal Vertigo* my italic.

⁴⁸⁸ In my master thesis, I noted that “*Between* the photographic fragments from different temporalities there are gaps or separations, but also a connection or *joining* of conflicting temporalities.” See Ingvild Kristine Melby, “Skin of memory” (Master thesis, 2021), 28, <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/88245>.

stripped of context, it carries the grainy texture of the archival, evoking an anonymous ethnographic or medical record. A third, tightly framed color photograph of a synthetic pubic tuft surrounded by lurex and fur conjures a scene of fetishized performance —where racialized flesh is rendered a spectacle. This constellation is punctuated by the stylized pose of a white women in fur, her gesture of mock horror or theatrical distress further intensifying the tension of the grid. These fragments span disparate temporalities and visual registers, yet each is bound by an underlying structure: the racialized body rendered vulnerable and disposable under the white gaze. These connections do not unfold through fixed narrative or chronology, but through affective force —where violence, fetishization, and subjection are registered and allowed to reverberate across time. It is this relational ambiguity —this felt proximity that resists resolution— that characterizes Orupabo’s approach to time.

This forced proximity between dissonant fragments opens onto what Akomfrah refers to as *affective proximity*, where the “violent juxtaposition” of heterogeneous image material generates affective resonances between images that do not historically align.⁴⁸⁹ As Akomfrah explains in relation to his multi-screen video installation *Purple* (2017), this montage technique involves what he describes as a deliberate “sequestration” of fragments. Instead of dissolving each fragment into a unified narrative, it is allowed to persist in its singularity while being compelled into a dynamic interaction with temporally dissonant visual material.

⁴⁹⁰ Akomfrah elaborates:

And that’s what I mean by the sequestrations: you have to force them to engage with each other; and literally in this space of montage where things are being forced to clash with each other, something starts to merge. Now I don’t know in advance of that what will emerge...So the works start in effect at that moment of sequestration and convergence, when these screens are forced to have this dialogue with and amongst themselves.⁴⁹¹

He describes this as orchestrating something that “feels total” but consists of “discreet components that are basically doing their own thing.”⁴⁹² Importantly, Akomfrah frames this compositional choice as *an ethical gesture*. This, he says, is “precisely the ethic of the

⁴⁸⁹ Clara de Massol de Rebetz, “Purple by John Akomfrah: Confronting Human Histories with Deep Time in the Anthropocene,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2022): 5 The phrase “affective proximity” and “violent juxtapositions” are cited in Akomfrah’s interview with Anthony Downey, as referenced in the article.

⁴⁹⁰ John Akomfrah, “Vital Materialism: Filming the Anthropocene,” interview by Anthony Downey, 2017, <http://www.thirdtext.org/akomfrah-downey>.

⁴⁹¹ Akomfrah, “Vital Materialism: Filming the Anthropocene.”

⁴⁹² Akomfrah, “Vital Materialism: Filming the Anthropocene.”

practice that I am involved with: how do you make these [spatial and temporal] opposites talk to each other without doing violence to either.”⁴⁹³ By staging anachronisms Akomfrah challenges linear narratives and invites viewers to engage with history as a multifaceted and ongoing discourse. As Clara Mazol de Rebetz describes in her reading of *Purple*, this montage technique works by “making visible the affective and intimate connections between forced historical encounters.”⁴⁹⁴

A similar strategy is evident in Orupabo’s work, though her medium shifts the dynamics: Unlike Akomfrah’s durational and sometimes multi-screen montages, Orupabo works predominantly with photographs, illustrations and film stills or clips. While both artists resist the totalizing linear logic of Western historicism and engage the archive as a contested space, the temporal structures they construct diverge. In works such as *Purple*, Akomfrah assembles what de Rebetz describes as a “longue duree” — “a choreographic non-linear structure of slow violence,” generating “a weave of moments” in which “archival past, contemplative present, and prospective future move simultaneously and interdependently.”⁴⁹⁵ While Akomfrah resists a linear conception of history, his temporal layering of archival and contemporary imagery still evokes what de Rebetz describes a “passage of time” that evokes a sense of mourning.⁴⁹⁶ Orupabo’s juxtapositional cut, by contrast, holds fragments in a state of suspended tension. There is little sense of *passage of time*, no durational unfolding. Instead, her compositions reactivate dissonant temporalities through a forced, frictional proximity.⁴⁹⁷ This structure evokes a traumatic temporality in which the past forcefully invades and unfolds within the present. Disarticulated from context, the fragments appear as flashbacks or shards of memory that rupture the present with unresolved, affective force. Seen this way, Orupabo’s juxtapositional cut echoes what Cathy Caruth defines as traumatic temporality;

⁴⁹³ Akomfrah, “Vital Materialism: Filming the Anthropocene.”

⁴⁹⁴ Massol de Rebetz, “Purple by John Akomfrah,” 5 The phrase “affective proximity” and “violent juxtapositions” are cited in Akomfrah’s interview with Anthony Downey, as referenced in the article.

⁴⁹⁵ Massol de Rebetz, “Purple by John Akomfrah,” 3,9.

⁴⁹⁶ Massol de Rebetz, “Purple by John Akomfrah,” 9.

⁴⁹⁷ In a studio conversation conducted in October 2024 Orupabo discussed her paring of image fragments; “When I make the collages, by placing different things together, it’s also about a kind of crash. Things that shouldn’t stand together are forced together. I guess it’s that paring I’m interested in — because it’s something very current that is forced together with something very old. ...I am very interested in that —how the past is part of the present, which may also tell us what is going to happen.” This statement was subsequently confirmed in correspondence to the author 26.02 2026. She also made a similar comment in a recorded interview with the Photographer’s gallery. *Photographers’ Gallery, 2023, 03:12*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5Cz8C4is-k>.

the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.⁴⁹⁸

Rather than constructing counter-histories, or recuperating suppressed histories, Orupabo's juxtapositional cut stages a traumatic temporality: affectively jarring and temporally fractured. Her technique performs this temporality through rupture, repetition, and disorientation, actively resisting interpretive closure and fixed narrative trajectories.⁴⁹⁹ This collision relies on preserving *a space of separation* where fragments are not subsumed into a unified whole, but allowed to exist in their singularity. What emerges, then, is an opaque encounter that resists mastery, comprehension, and narrative resolution. By withholding the moment of convergence, Orupabo holds the fragments in unresolved, frictional proximity, recalling Akomfrah's earlier-described notion of sequestration, where montage forces fragments into confrontation without dissolving their singularity.⁵⁰⁰

The viewer, too, may be held within this tension. When narrative closure is withheld, a non-mastering relation unfolds in the space between work and beholder, sustained through uncertainty. This relation is not registered through comprehension but through the affective and sensory response to the disjunctions and rhythmic interruptions within the composition. Here, vision is not grounded in cognitive mastery but emerges through the body, in response to what cannot be fully known or resolved.

6.4.5 Online sourcing as an epistemic intervention

The operation of Orupabo's cut extends beyond the collage as an object and reorganizes the conditions under which these digitized artifacts from the colonial era circulate online, often decontextualized. Orupabo's previously described method of selecting and sourcing images on the internet can be understood as a form of cutting into this circulation, disrupting how

⁴⁹⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (JHU Press, 2016), 107.

⁴⁹⁹ This affective dimension of Orupabo's juxtapositional cut also resonates with Brigid Doherty's reading of Berlin Dada photomontage as traumatic in form, that she argues does not represent trauma but performs it through the juxtaposition of semantically disconnected images in the face of ideological deception and trauma. However, Orupabo's *juxtapositional* cut differs from the Dada montage in that it most often operates within the montage frame and depends on a maintained spatial separation between fragments. Rather than producing a seamless surface, her compositions hold images apart within rectilinear frames, —unlike the often jagged scalpelled edges characteristic of Dada montage — generating an affective confrontation through the friction of adjacency and temporal displacement. See: Brigid Doherty, "'See: 'We Are All Neurasthenics'!' Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997)

⁵⁰⁰ Akomfrah, "Vital Materialism: Filming the Anthropocene."

these images are encountered and contextualized within digital circulation. As the critic Sihle Motsa describes, these images are part of the “presents circulatory regime”— they; “live and breathe amongst us,” continuing to move through digital platforms and visual economies.⁵⁰¹ This digital context frequently reduces collections into digital repositories where the “single photograph”, as Joanna Sassoon has argued, is perceived to be “uncomplicated, transparent, and passive representations of truth,” unmoored from their original contexts and relationships.⁵⁰² In this sense, Orupabo’s cut does not function solely as a material incision but extends to an epistemological level, challenging the assumption that archival photographs operate as transparent and unmediated evidence of the past. This can be seen as a form of critique and disruption of the frameworks these images have historically been understood and categorized. It is also a challenge to archival authority and their perceived objectivity. Her practice of online sourcing underscores the fact that colonial imagery not only belongs to the past but continues to move through contemporary visual economies. Orupabo’s engagement with these images reveals how the afterlives of colonialism persist in contemporary visual culture, now circulating widely through digital platforms rather than remaining confined to institutional archives. Instead of restoring the images to a stable archival context, or into alternative narratives, Orupabo’s practice exposes the instability of their meanings within the open digital commons.

The refusal of settled meaning articulated through Orupabo’s cut becomes especially pronounced in Orupabo’s Instagram practice (Figure 4). As an example, we can use the image fragment “Dirty dirt” in *Cloud of confusion* (2024) discussed in Section 6.4.4. A screen shot of Orupabo’s Instagram account shows the image fragment in a slightly different crop, situated among a different constellation of material. Among these are a medical illustration captioned “Principles of management of colorectal foreign bodies,” a short clip of Irma Thomas singing, a watermarked portrait of an unnamed Black man smoking, and a film still from “La noire de...” (1966) by Ousmane Sembène.⁵⁰³ On a smartphone screen, between nine and twelve image fragments are fully visible at once. Every scroll replaces some images

⁵⁰¹ Sihle Motsa, “Frida Orupabo,” Articles, *AFRICANAH.ORG*, December 8, 2022, <https://africanah.org/frida-orupabo-2/>.

⁵⁰² Joanna Sassoon, “Photographic Meaning in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1, no. 0 (2007): 306.

⁵⁰³ Where the sources of image material that Orupabo uses to construct her physical collages are seldom revealed, Orupabo occasionally captions her Instagram posts directing the viewer to the source. These captions, however, are not visible when scrolling. The viewer needs to click on a post in order to read the captions

and rearranges others, altering or reconfiguring the relations between them.⁵⁰⁴ This interaction produces a form of visual drift in which images emerge and recede, shifting in and out of view, their relations continually restructured. Orupabo mobilizes these affordances as a part of a sustained compositional practice, echoing Orupabo's broader refusal of fixed meaning. In this context, the gesture of the cut extends beyond a compositional strategy to an experiential condition that is enacted through interface, embodied gesture, and temporally unfolding engagement. This aesthetic of temporal and epistemic instability also extends to the affective structure of Orupabo's work. Rather than interpretive closure, her Instagram account stages unresolved encounters with images that reverberate across time. As Orupabo explains; with "each image you put out [on your Instagram account] you create a new constellation."⁵⁰⁵ Each new post reactivates and unsettles the relation between existing fragments, preventing any configuration from becoming fixed.⁵⁰⁶ This instability is further enhanced by the act of scrolling itself: as viewers move through her account, the proximity and sequence of images continually shift, generating new constellations with each gesture.

⁵⁰⁴ Merete Jonvik et al., *Kunst som deling, delingens kunst*, 1. utgave. (Fagbokforlaget, 2020), 51.

⁵⁰⁵ Rhoda Tchokokam, "A conversation with Frida Orupabo," Atoubaa, September 11, 2016, <https://www.atoubaa.com/english-stories/nemiepeba-fridaorupabo-interview>.

⁵⁰⁶ Notably, Orupabo tends to post in rapid, concentrated bursts before a period of silence sharing many images over the course of a day or two, followed by a period of silence. This posting rhythm mirrors the disjunctive temporal structure of her collages. As of May 2025, Orupabo seems to have stopped posting on Instagram under @nemiepeba. Her last post was dated September 9, 2023. She continues to "like" and comment using her @nemiepeba username.

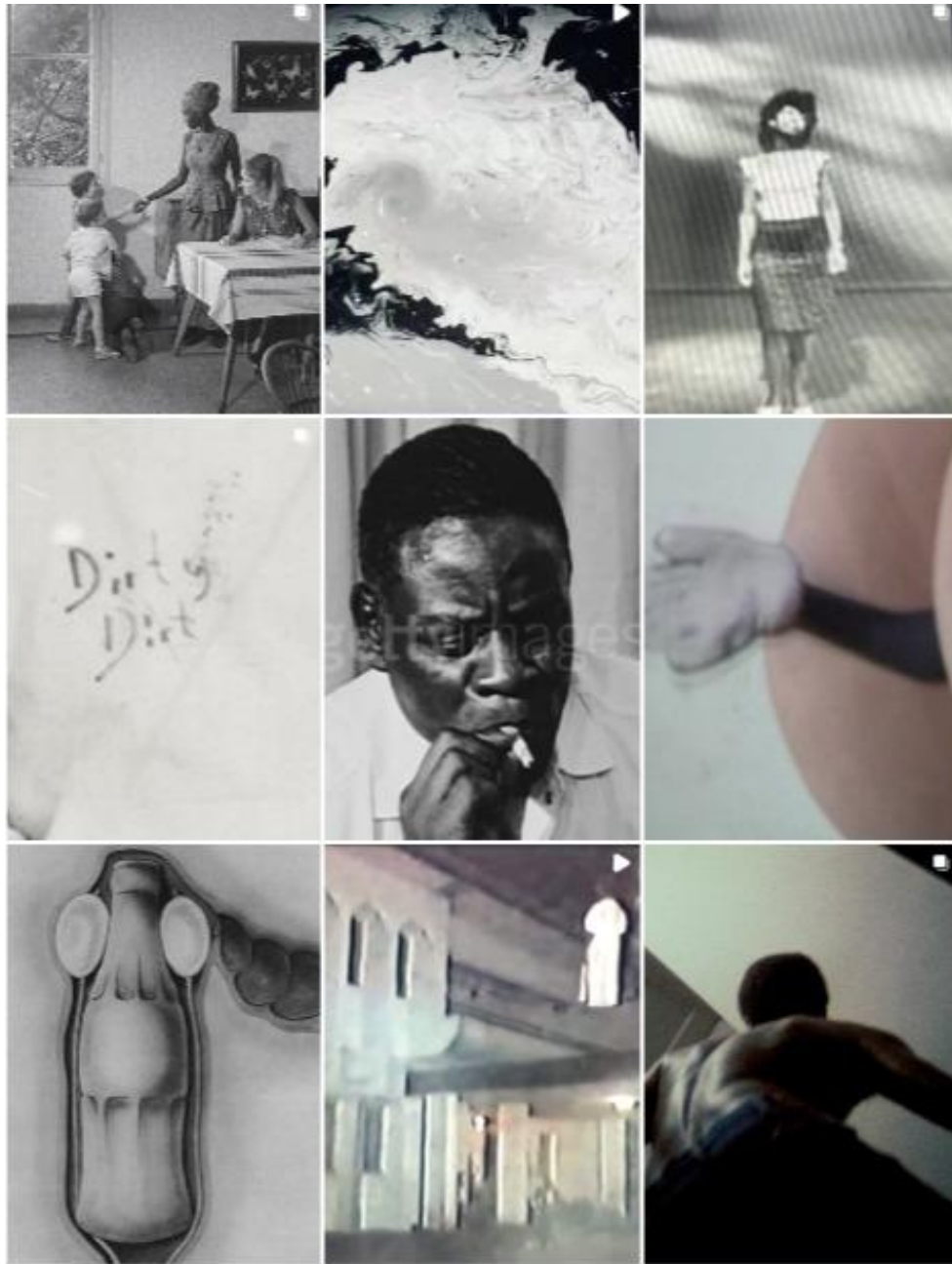


Figure 4: Screen shoot of @nemiapeba Instagram account 27.05.2025. The fragment with the text “Dirty Dirt” was first posted on Orupabo’s Instagram account @nemiepeba on 26 August 2021 with a caption that directs the viewer to Deborah Luster’s photographic work “One big self –Prisoners of Luisiana” (1998-2002) on the predominantly black Louisiana prison population. In Orupabo’s *Cloud of confusion* this contextual information lacks and the crop of the fragment is slightly altered. Note: The screen shot is taken after Instagram replaced its 1:1 square grid with the 4:5 portrait format. However, when you click on the image the original appears.

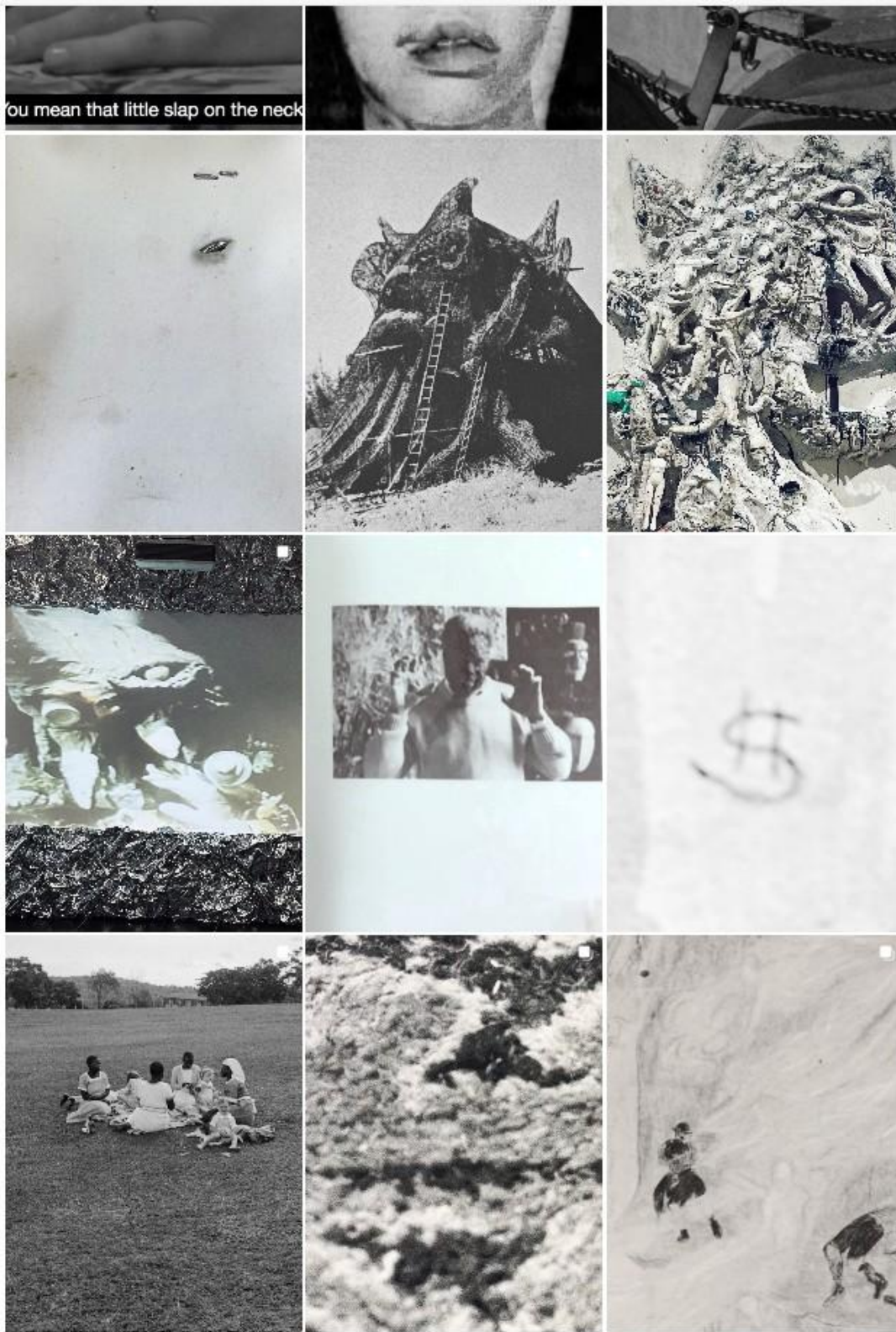


Figure 5: Screen shot of @nemiepeba 27.05.2025. The screenshot includes an image fragment from *Cloud of confusion* (2024). A predominantly white surface with a wound-like rupture. Here, however, it appears in an entirely different context: alongside an image of a work by Niki de Saint Phalle, an uncaptioned image of a scrawled dollar sign, and an image captioned “Kampala, Uganda, 1937” e.o. hoppe estate collection.

This is not solely an act of excision or fragmentation. Orupabo's method of re-cutting and re-contextualization of images deny the colonial gaze urge to define and grasp by holding them within the provisional and relational space of her practice. In this way, Orupabo's cut refuses the archival logic of fixing history into a coherent narrative, instead enacting what Glissant calls the *right to opacity*—not as a generative act of meaning-production in Kember and Zylinska's sense— but as a mode of relation that holds complexity, ambiguity, and ways of being that exceed dominant epistemologies. As Glissant asserts; “For the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications. We demand the right to obscurity.”⁵⁰⁷ This sense of unresolvedness resonates with Moten's critique of historical containment (as previously articulated), in which the past is never fully secured but continually unsettles the present.

This refusal of total transparency finds resonance in Orupabo's fragmented compositions, where meaning does not settle into a singular coherent narrative but remains layered, contested, and resistant to narrative resolution. As discussed earlier, Kember and Zylinska's frame the cut as an ethical imperative that operates across multiple artistic and material practices. As they write:

The recurrent moment of the cut—one we encounter not just in photography but also in film making, sculpture, writing, or, indeed, any other technical practice that involves transforming matter—will be posited by us as both a technique (an ontological entity encapsulating something that is, or something that is taking place) and an ethical imperative (as expressed by the command: “Cut!”).⁵⁰⁸

Arthur Jafa captures a related but distinct dimension of Orupabo's Instagram practice in an essay written for the 2019 exhibition *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*. He describes her online practice as a “procession of deeply figured picture sequences...that hover above a darkly articulated subject position without ever quite settling into anything simply declarative.” Emphasizing how the image fragment, in Orupabo's work, unfolds affectively rather than narratively, Jafa writes:

Ostensibly a collection serially presented images, some “found”, some constructed, extracted, or emptied out. What one is confronted with is nothing less than a procession of deeply figured picture sequences (mostly still but often moving) that hover above a darkly articulated subject position without ever quite settling into anything simply declarative, or perhaps even enunciative. In its unhurried, yet temporaneous delivery of “pictures”

⁵⁰⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2.

⁵⁰⁸ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 71.

(material instantiation of images), one is left with (to my gut) *an affective field* which is as black and unprecedented as anything ever produced under the regime of what clearly is some form of proto cinema.⁵⁰⁹

This language of *hovering* is conceptually adjacent to Jafa's formulation *Black Visual Intonation*, where affect arises not from narrative progression but by inhabiting a space *between* (Western) tones. This aesthetic zone achieved through what he calls "semi-stable sonic phenomena," "intonation," and "vibration" that exceed hegemonic notation, operates as the audible correlative of the irreducible opacity that Orupabo insists upon. It names the resultant aesthetic condition of an ongoing, unresolved presence which resists confinement to declarative structures.⁵¹⁰ In this context, Orupabo's use of the cut, particularly her juxtapositional cut, actively frustrates the impulse toward legible outcome that structures generative mediation. Rather, they inhabit a space of ambiguity and opacity, generating a sensory experience that resists interpretive closure into a fixed, dominant system of signification. While Orupabo's practice predominately revolves around the still image, Jafa's framing aligns her practice with early experimental cinema, reinforcing the idea that her cuts, even in digital form, sustain an unresolved, quivering tension in which fragments never settle into fixed meaning but remain suspended indeterminate, affective modulation.⁵¹¹ However, in Orupabo's work, the fragment does not only "hover" within a single composition, it remains in motion; actively migrating between platforms and works.

For instance, two of the fragments that appear in *Cloud of confusion* (2024) were used in different forms and constellations online (see posts dated 23 September 2022 and 26 August

⁵⁰⁹ Arthur Jafa, "Some Very Preliminary Thoughts on the Work of Frida Orupabo, Missylanyus, Ming Smith," Moderna Museet i Stockholm, accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/arthur-jafa/on-frida-orupabo-missylanyus-ming-smith/> (my emphasis).

⁵¹⁰ Arthur Jafa, "Arthur Jafa in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist," interview by Obrist, n.d., accessed May 22, 2025, <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/arthur-jafa/arthur-jafa-hans-ulrich-obrist/>; Arthur Jafa, "Love Is the Message, the Plan Is Death," interview by Tina M. Campt, 2017, *h. E-flux Journal#*, New York, n. 81.

⁵¹¹ The attention to rhythm, affect, and non-linear intensity in Jafa's quote is consistent with what Jafa has elsewhere described as *Black Visual Intonation*. Black visual intonation is connected to Jafa's ambition to make the "cinematic equivalent of the black voice" a cinema "that has the power, beauty, and alienation of black music". Drawing from the embodied aesthetics of Black music, he seeks to transpose its power into the visual register through "the use of irregular, non-tempered camera rates and frame replication to prompt filmic movement to function in a manner that approximates Black vocal intonation."

2021).⁵¹² In its earlier appearance on Instagram, the *Dirty Dirt* fragment appeared alongside what may be described as a constellation of “power, beauty, and alienation” —to borrow a phrase from Jafa.⁵¹³ Images evoking musical and cinematic greatness (Irma Thomas and Ousmane Sembène), a clinical diagram of rectal trauma, and an unnamed portrait of a Black man together produce a tonal field that resists interpretive closure. When the same fragment appears in the work *Cloud of confusion* (2024), it enters into a new and dissonant constellation; Suspended in a visual tension among images of subjugation, bodily fragmentation, and trauma. This shift underscores that the fragment’s meaning remains provisional, actively resisting the mandate for stabilization that typically renders visual components into discrete and fixed formations. Through constant re-contextualizing, Orupabo resists allowing the fragment to settle into a single, coherent aesthetic or narrative totality. In this sense, the imperative of the cut in Orupabo’s practice unfolds not as a single rupture but an ongoing process of re-cutting and re-contextualizing image fragments, insisting on their enduring unresolved presence in time rather than their containment within historical closure.⁵¹⁴

This mobilization of the fragment across temporal and formal registers places the fragment within an ever-shifting relational structure where it remains open-ended, shifting and always becoming, thus endowing the fragment with a sense of potentiality. What changes, then, is not necessarily the individual image, but the constellation it enters; the shifting proximities between fragments. The cut, then, unfolds as an interval of relation, grounded in opacity and irreducible difference.⁵¹⁵ What emerges is not clarity but an affectively charged opacity: an encounter shaped by resonance and tension rather than resolution. In this sense, Orupabo’s practice aligns with Arthur Jafa’s assertion that he is less concerned with the image itself than with the gap *between* images.

⁵¹² In January 2025 Instagram replaced its 1:1 square grid with a new 4:5 portrait-oriented format. This change also affects how older posts appear on users’ profiles, including images posted on Orupabo’s --@nemiepeba-- Instagram account.

⁵¹³ Jafa, “Arthur Jafa in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist.”

⁵¹⁴ I return to this in Section 6.5.3 and 7.5.

⁵¹⁵ While this interval may be described as generative, it does not generate legibility or meaning. Rather, it sustains a condition of non-resolution where presence persists without assimilation into dominant frameworks of legibility.

Drawing on John Akomfrah's conceptual focus on *affective proximity*, Jafa describes this "immaterial thing in between" as the primary site of manipulation, which he calls the "flow" between images.⁵¹⁶ It is in these mutable instances —these dynamic proximities—that a relational opacity takes shape: a refusal to settle into coherence, where fragments are "sequestered" and, through enforced proximity, made to quiver in their difference. If, as Glissant writes, the "the pitch of the sound conferred significance," then Orupabo's visual cuts might likewise be said to confer a relational charge through juxtaposition and spatial resonance.⁵¹⁷

6.4.6 The ethical cut and representation

What is at stake, then, is not only how images relate, but how the cut itself configures the *conditions of relation*, determining what may appear, how difference is encountered, and what remains withheld. The shifting proximities and resonant intervals explored above point toward a deeper consideration of Orupabo's cut as an ethical and formal intervention. While Kember and Zylinska frame the cut as an ethical operation within an ongoing generative process of mediation —one that produces new relations and meaning over time — their account remains invested in mediation as a "vital," meaning-oriented flow.⁵¹⁸ Film and visual culture scholar Asbjørn Grønstad retains this ethical framing but redirects attention away from generativity as such and toward the moment where mediation is configured into form.⁵¹⁹ Where Kember and Zylinska emphasize ontological and ethical productivity of cutting as process, Grønstad anchors ethical significance in the configured image itself, arguing that ethics is located "not on the level of content but on the level of aesthetic form."⁵²⁰ Ethics, in his account, does not primarily unfold through relational becoming as process, but is embodied in the formal articulation that materializes generativity within the transmissible structures of cinematic form; the specific way a scene is shot, its duration, or its framing. Grønstad emphasizes that the cut is not only an aesthetic gesture but an intrinsically ethical

⁵¹⁶ Arthur Jafa, "Interview: Arthur Jafa," interview by Cassie da Costa, May 8, 2017, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-arthur-jafa/>.

⁵¹⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 123–24.

⁵¹⁸ Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, xix, 71.

⁵¹⁹ Grønstad explicitly defines "scopic entelechy" as the term designating "a process of idealization through which the dominant class manifestation is framed as the generative and normative instance of all other manifestations." He notes that an authentic cinematic ethics must be committed "toward a critique of what I define as scopic entelechy". However, this dissertation employs Glissant's concept of opacity and its critique of transparency to perform this analysis, prioritizing a political philosophical engagement with the colonial framework of visibility already established in Chapter 4. See Asbjørn Grønstad, *Asbjørn Grønstad (2016) Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016) 7, 75, 93–95.

⁵²⁰ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 6.

act. He argues that such cutting opens the world to alterity within the formal structures of representation.⁵²¹ Grønstad writes:

In making a cut, images transform the existing fabric of the world, and the nature of this particular act is inevitably and inescapably ethical. While the practice of cutting is not mimetic in itself, the ethics it engenders still maintains a relation with the sphere of representation. This is because aesthetic works open themselves to alterity, the manifestations of which might be captured in a film's formal configurations.⁵²²

Following this, drawing on postcolonial thought and Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, Grønstad suggests that the cut is a site where knowledge is shaped but also withheld, albeit still within the horizon of representational form through which the ethical encounter is mediated. Rather than fully disclosing the other, opacity safeguards difference, ensuring that the cut does not assimilate but sustains an encounter that is open-ended.⁵²³ He argues that; "an ethics of form emerges precisely in the space where opacity materializes artistically."⁵²⁴ Grønstad defines the ethical cut as an act that is "not mimetic" but remains tied to the "sphere of representation".⁵²⁵ He argues that cutting transforms the "fabric of the world" opening aesthetic works to alterity through their formal structures.⁵²⁶ In this sense, the ethical cut is not a neutral incision but a formal intervention that opens a site where irreducible difference becomes perceptible *within representation*.

6.4.7 Beyond representation: Opacity as ethical refusal

In Orupabo's hinged collages, the cuts or gaps between fragments are neither part of the photographic image nor assimilated into the constructed body of the collage. They remain materially exposed ruptures that resist integration into a continuous seamless surface. These interstitial spaces are material thresholds that interrupt the continuity of the representational surface, resisting incorporation into a coherent visual field. If Grønstad's ethical cut remains grounded within representation as the site where alterity may be encountered, Orupabo's cut raises a more radical question: must alterity be mediated through representation? Orupabo's cut allows us to pursue this question further. Instead of framing the cut as an openness to alterity *within* representational form, in her hinged collages, the cut exposes a presence that

⁵²¹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 6.

⁵²² Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

⁵²³ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 199–200.

⁵²⁴ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 201.

⁵²⁵ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

⁵²⁶ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

cannot be settled into form, meaning, or stabilized relation. Put differently, the cut does not function as a formal articulation through which otherness becomes encounterable, in the manner Grønstad describes, but instead suspends the very conditions under which such encounterability is produced. It produces an interstitial space in which alterity is neither rendered legible nor stabilized as an encounterable opacity within a representational configuration. The gaps between image fragments destabilize representational coherence, interrupting the visual continuity through which alterity might be encountered within form, holding presence in a state that resists both assimilation and representational modes of relational articulation.

Concretely, in his reading of John Akomfrah's *Nine Muses*, Grønstad argues that the "liberation" and subsequent recontextualization of archival images from institutional contexts into "new image ensembles" reconfigures the viewers gaze, allowing history to be encountered not as a unified narrative but as polyvocal and stratified within representation. These "aesthetic rearticulations" of "heterogeneous aesthetic matter", argues Grønstad, produce "new points of connection" that "manifests a gesture that is deeply ethical."⁵²⁷ In this act of remembrance, ethical engagement emerges through the careful configuration of representational form.

Orupabo's three-dimensional cut operates at a different threshold, extending beyond Grønstad's claim that form is a transmissible structure that facilitates an encounter with alterity. Orupabo's three-dimensional cut produces a non-site between archival image fragments that agitates the image at the level of its material construction, unsettling the very conditions under which representation functions as an ethical medium. In this way, alterity does not become encounterable through polyvocal rearticulation of historical images but remains suspended in the indeterminate space *between* image fragments. These interstitial spaces resist being claimed as sites of representation, even as they destabilize representation from within, without themselves becoming representational forms. In this sense, the gesture of the cut functions as a refusal of epistemological capture, resisting assimilation into the transparent structures that govern how subjects are seen.

Orupabo's cut does more than fragment the colonial archive; it can be seen to enact an *ethical refusal*. Her practice interrupts the archival demand for transparency and legibility. Photographic fragments are not reassembled into a new stable whole but held apart, thereby

⁵²⁷ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 182.

resisting the mediating impulse to stabilize meaning into a single, coherent form. Importantly, this refusal to settle meaning into form is not a negation of presence; rather, it holds presence within fragmentation by creating a space between fragments that belongs neither fully to the photographic fragment nor to the constructed body of the collage. This indeterminate interval has no formal boundaries of its own; it is constituted only in relation to the fragments it separates and cannot be stabilized as a site of representation in itself. Because the gap between image fragments is not fully of either, it resists intellectual grasp and cannot be assimilated into a pre-given structured epistemic relational framework. It is important to note that this is not a withholding of relation as such. It is a refusal of those relational frameworks that Glissant critiques —asymmetrical and grounded in epistemic mastery— through which difference is rendered encounterable, knowable, or coherent within dominant visual regimes.⁵²⁸ In Glissantian terms, the cut produces an “insistent presence,” a presence that remains perceptible yet resists being rendered fully graspable.⁵²⁹ It resists epistemic mastery by refusing to enter regimes of recognition or coherence, remaining irreducible to the terms through which images and subjects are rendered fully intelligible. While this resonates with what Grønstad describes as the ethical force of aesthetic expressions — an “affirmation of the values of uncertainty, openness, and opacity”⁵³⁰ — Orupabo’s cut extends this refusal beyond structured relationality.⁵³¹

Grønstad’s ethical cut remains grounded in form as a site of relational engagement with alterity. What it does not interrogate, however, are the epistemological conditions under which relationality itself becomes possible, or legible. Orupabo’s cut not only extends this refusal but exposes and unsettles the very terms under which relation is structured. Rather than positioning opacity as a space where engagement occurs on different terms, her cut refuses the imperative to engage on any predetermined terms of recognition, resolution, or epistemic coherence.⁵³² That is, Orupabo does not merely organize archival fragments into

⁵²⁸ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

⁵²⁹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 111.

⁵³⁰ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 8.

⁵³¹ By *structured relationality*, I refer to a mode of relation grounded in Enlightenment epistemologies that privilege intelligibility, coherence, and transparency. Within this framework, difference is made knowable through preexisting categories —producing relational frameworks rooted in classification, recognition, and narrative resolution. These structures underpin archival, disciplinary, and representational regimes, stabilizing the subject-object relation (the knower and the known). In contrast, Glissant’s opacity, both as ethical demand and as a mode of resistance, offers a radically different mode of relation: one that resists epistemic containment, refuses the fixation of the Other, and sustains the irreducibility of difference.

⁵³² Opacity, as Glissant formulates it, is a demand from the Other: a refusal to be reduced, grasped, or made transparent within dominant frames of understanding. As Glissant writes on page 190 in *Poetics of*

alternative image sequences to create new historical narratives; rather, she interrupts the very conditions under which archival fragments become encounterable as images—that is, as coherent, legible representational objects. At this point Grønstad provides an important point of contrast. As he argues, “an ethics of form emerges precisely in the space where opacity materializes artistically.”⁵³³ This implies that form and ethics remain bound, and that opacity can be formally registered and engaged with within a *representational* framework, as Grønstad insists, “[w]hile the practice of cutting is not mimetic in itself, the ethics it engenders still maintains a relation with the sphere of representation.”⁵³⁴ By contrast, I argue that Orupabo’s cut marks a shift from representation-as-opening onto alterity to the cut as an affective presence that resists representational stabilization. Instead of rendering alterity encounterable within representation, the cut resists absorption into representational frameworks aimed at achieving semantic stabilization or comprehensible meaning. What is interrupted here is not representation as such, but the stabilizing function through which representation seeks to render difference legible as an object of knowledge.

Whereas Grønstad’s ethical cut maintains a structured engagement with alterity, Orupabo’s cut insists on opacity as a mode of presence that refuses epistemic capture. This opacity is not an aesthetic withdrawal nor a rupture that precedes the emergence of new stabilized meaning. Rather, it lingers as an unresolved presence between image fragments that unsettles the epistemic imperative toward resolution and relational containment.⁵³⁵ Yet this is not a negation of relation itself, but a radically different orientation toward relation. In Glissantian terms, it preserves difference as difference, resisting fixation that would subsume it into comparison or recognition.⁵³⁶ In Orupabo’s collages, this interruption thwarts the colonial and scientific gaze’s demand for mastery. Instead, the cut produces a relational opacity in which difference is neither assimilated nor entirely withdrawn, but irreducibly present.⁵³⁷ Whereas Grønstad locates the ethical force of film in its aesthetic configurations, he argues that these configurations introduce the “values of uncertainty, openness, and opacity” within the formal

Relation, “In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments.” Opacity thus marks the ethical necessity of relation without comparison.

⁵³³ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 201.

⁵³⁴ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

⁵³⁵ In this context, “rupture” designates a formal or epistemic break that still presupposes the possibility of resolution or the reconstitution of fixed meaning. Orupabo’s cut, by contrast, suspends that teleological orientation: the fragments are held in an indeterminate interval where meaning does not stabilize, even as the possibility of stabilization remains latent.

⁵³⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

⁵³⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 171.

specificities of cinematic representation. Through these formal operations, film may generate what he describes as a “a pre-ontological ethics generated by the material and formal specificity of images themselves.”⁵³⁸ Orupabo’s material cut operates at another threshold. Rather than generating an ethical encounter through the formal organization of representation, it introduces an interstitial space between fragments that destabilizes the conditions under which alterity becomes encounterable as an image.

Orupabo’s cut does more than thwart the colonizing gaze: it reorients the conditions under which artworks become encounterable within representational form. It is here, where the conditions of encounter become reconfigured, that the caressing gaze becomes necessary as a mode of engagement attuned to what resists stabilization. Unlike a gaze that seeks to stabilize and comprehend, the caressing gaze does not attempt to resolve material fragmentation but lingers with its gaps and ambiguities, engaging sensuously with what remains beyond conceptualization. It sustains a mode of encounter that, to borrow the words of Lévinas— affects the subject “without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation.”⁵³⁹ Through this form of engagement, the material and compositional structure of Orupabo’s work becomes inseparable from its ethical implications. Orupabo’s material cut insists on opacity not as negation of meaning but as an excess that resists epistemic containment. If Grønstad’s cut opens onto alterity, Orupabo’s cut holds presence in suspension, sustaining an encounter that remains unresolved, moving through tensions of presence and withdrawal without yielding to epistemic mastery. To further develop how Orupabo’s cuts operate visually and materially within the work, I turn to Didi-Huberman’s concept of the *pan*. He introduces the *pan* to describe a symptomatic rupture that erupts from the materiality of the work itself. It marks a material-figural excess that disturbs both form and content; fracturing the coherence of the visual field from within.

6.4.8 Pan and the symptomatic surface

By intervening in the photograph’s surface, Orupabo creates a material wound that unworks representational coherence from within. This section focuses on how the three-dimensional

⁵³⁸ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 5, 8, 88.

⁵³⁹ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 81.

cut operates not as a symbolic gesture, but as a material disturbance.⁵⁴⁰ Although developed in relation to painting, Didi-Huberman's concept of the pan offers a productive lens for approaching Orupabo's three-dimensional cut, which similarly unsettles the image from within.

The "pan" designates a symptomatic eruption within the artwork—a material event that presses forward, unsettling and "even tyranniz[ing]" representation from within, resisting assimilation into coherent definition and exposing it as a site of instability. In his reading of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*, Didi-Huberman focuses on how Vermeer first paints a mimetically "legitimized" thread and then, next to it, "another thread, one that imitates nothing," an unravelling of pure color and material paint, "an accident."⁵⁴¹ Didi-Huberman describes this second thread as a painterly event—a "sovereign accident"—that disturbs the mimetic regime.⁵⁴² As he writes:

For it is imbued, this pan, with a singular capacity for expansion and diffusion: it infects, we might even say affects.....the entire picture. And one by one, the mimetic self-evidences begin to crumble..⁵⁴³

According to Didi-Huberman, this "unraveling...flow" is where form and meaning come undone, where the work reveals its constructed, contingent, and unstable nature. Orupabo's three-dimensional cut similarly draws attention to the artwork's material condition, not as a failure of representation, but as a moment where the image insists on its own visual and tactile presence, forcing a confrontation between figuration and material disruption. Like the red thread in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*, the cut marks a material insistence that interrupts representational logic of the image and draws attention to its surface as both symbolic and wounded, both legible and undone. Like the pan, the cut may be understood as a quality of the figural symptom⁵⁴⁴: it brings something into visual presence not through articulation but through disruption, producing a visibility that is partial, illegible, and affectively charged.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁰ While I emphasize the material force of the cut in this reading, I do not suggest a strict opposition between material and symbolic registers. Rather, I foreground how Orupabo's intervention operates first and foremost as a tactile, visual disturbance that precedes and exceeds symbolic legibility.

⁵⁴¹ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 254–55.

⁵⁴² Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 256.

⁵⁴³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 256.

⁵⁴⁴ I use the term "figurable" in Didi-Huberman's sense, not as a clear or mimetic re-presentation, but as a mode of visibility that emerges through material disruption and the breakdown of form. See *Confronting Images*, p 8, 18.

⁵⁴⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 17–18 Didi-Huberman writes: "It is not an articulated sign; it is not legible as such. It just offers itself: a pure "'appearance 'of something' '"* that puts us in the presence of the chalky color, long before it tells us what this color "'fills'" or qualifies. All that appears,

6.4.9 Opacity as Excess

While the *pan* designates a material disruption imminent to the artwork, I now turn to Didi-Huberman's notion of "the rend" to unfold the epistemological consequences of the cut. His concepts of "the rend" and the "anadyomene movement" allows me to articulate the cut as an affective disturbance; an epistemological and ontological scission.⁵⁴⁶ An opening in the field of representation where the work refuses to settle into a coherent whole. As Didi-Huberman writes of the rend:

This something, this just the same are in place of an opening and a scission: vision is here rent between seeing and looking; the image is rent between representing and self-presenting. In this rend, then, something is at work that I cannot grasp—or that cannot grasp me wholly, lastingly—because I am not dreaming, but that nonetheless breaches me in the visibility of the painting like an event of the gaze, ephemeral and partial..⁵⁴⁷

Still, as I will argue, the force of Orupabo's three-dimensional cut stems not from what is torn, but from what *refuses to become whole*. Uneven joints, hinge-like attachments, and suspended limbs produce a bodily strain that wavers between cohesion and collapse, producing a visceral experience of suspension, constraint, or wounding. Rather than emerging through the visual clash of incongruent images, as I discussed in relation to affective proximity and juxtapositional cut in Section 6.4.4 and 6.4.5, the affective force here arises from the sculptural instability of the collage itself. This material strategy becomes especially visible in *Baby in Belly* (Figure 13), where a photographic fragment is cut and layered over another image beneath it, creating the appearance of a wound to the skin. Here, the three-dimensional cut constructs a space of disturbance through material intervention —activating the collage as thing-like, bodily, and wounded.⁵⁴⁸

In this instance, the cut unfolds in a constant negotiation between emergence and retreat, what Didi-Huberman describes as an *Anadyomene movement*. The term Anadyomene refers to a dialectical motion of both breaking surface *and* receding or withdrawing back.⁵⁴⁹ In other

then, is the quality of the figurable—terribly concrete, illegible, presented. Massive and deployed. Implicating† the gaze of a subject, its history, its fantasies, its internal divisions."

⁵⁴⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 170,189.

⁵⁴⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 156.

⁵⁴⁸ I return to *Baby in Belly* in a later Section 7.2, where I offer a more sustained analysis.

⁵⁴⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143 Didi-Huberman also uses the Anadyomene to describe the oscillatory temporality of images; their movement between visibility and disappearance. In images in *Spite of All*, this concept is linked to the Sonderkommando photographs, which persist despite efforts to erase them. This rhythm of re-emergence is also relevant to Orupabo's cut, as her images, too, resurface from a violent colonial archive, resisting both disappearance and full disclosure. See, *Images in Spite of All* p 46-47 .

words, the work materializes while resisting full disclosure, unfolding gradually through a shifting interplay of visibility and opacity. This movement is key to understanding Orupabo's cut; where the cut does not settle into visibility but remains in tension — where presence shifts between appearance and withdrawal. The cut, then, extends beyond fragmentation; it sustains an unresolved process where presence gathers force without settling into form. As Didi-Huberman describes, this movement is not a binary opposition between presence and absence, but a force within the image that “shows through” representation, refusing to settle into withdrawal or full visibility.⁵⁵⁰ This refusal does not amount to negation of meaning but rather sustains an insistence on presence or force that does not reveal itself fully and cannot be contained. He further elaborates:

There is here a kind of anadyomene movement, a movement whereby something that has plunged into the water momentarily reemerges, is born before quickly plunging in again: it is the *materia informis* when it shows through† form, it is the presentation when it shows through representation, it is opacity when it shows through transparency, it is the visual when it shows through the visible.⁵⁵¹

In Orupabo's work, the cut does not simply fragment; it sustains a rupture that remains open, refusing full disclosure or obscurity. As Didi-Huberman's concept of the *rend* suggests, this is not purely a fissure but a material disturbance that exposes an ambivalent force within the image that resists being absorbed into a coherent representational order. The *rend* breaks the representational surface, and through this breach, other meanings, affects, or fragmentary traces surge forth —not as clear, stable, and legible forms, but as distortions, fragments, and enigmas. It is this oscillation that conditions what Didi-Huberman calls the *Anadyomene* movement: the emergence of presence through the very instability that the *rend* creates.⁵⁵²

In this way, Didi-Huberman's theorization of the *rend* helps unfold how Orupabo's cut functions; it exceeds a destructive act, insisting on a presence that resists closure. The cut, like the *rend*, does not fully sever or disclose but sustains a *space of tension* where meaning remains unresolved, suspended between disappearance and assimilation. Whereas the *rend* exposes a presence that “shows through” re-presentation without fully belonging to it,⁵⁵³

⁵⁵⁰ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143,170.

⁵⁵¹ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143.

⁵⁵² Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 144.

⁵⁵³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143,170.

Orupabo's cut moves *beyond* representation into an insistence that resists even structured forms of relationality.

This ambivalent interstice troubles representation, it expands, diffuses, and refuses to be contained. As Didi-Huberman suggests, to think the “fabric” of representation with its “rend”, and the symbol “*with its interruption*,” is to recognize how this rupture unsettles meaning rather than foreclosing it.⁵⁵⁴ This movement is key to Orupabo's work, where the cut does not simply fragment but sustains a dynamic negotiation between emergence and withdrawal, without resolving into closure. It holds open an encounter that refuses assimilation but *remains with* difference — aligning with Glissant's conception of opacity as a refusal of epistemic mastery.⁵⁵⁵ Importantly, this opacity is not a form of containment; it is an opening onto uncontained signification, a plurality of indeterminate traces, where the artwork resists full apprehension, yet refuses total withdrawal. This is not a binary but paradoxical inversion in which extremes converge — akin to the photographic image in which what is blacked out, obscured by the absence of light, and the blinding white of an overexposed image, equally obscure —rendering opacity through different means.

Opacity, in Orupabo's work, unfolds as an agitating force that resists incorporation into representational regimes, disturbing the drive toward transparency and reduction that Glissant identifies as constitutive of Western Enlightenment thought.⁵⁵⁶ As Didi-Huberman's concept of the rend suggests, this disturbance does not fully sever but remains as an excess that troubles and unsettles representation, preventing it from fully coalescing into representational coherence.⁵⁵⁷ Similarly, Orupabo's cut functions as a material intervention that unsettles visual meaning without closing it off, opening a space where difference remains unresolved, producing an encounter that resists epistemic certainty and instead engages the viewer on an affective, embodied level.

This understanding of *the rend* is particularly relevant to Orupabo's three-dimensional cuts, where the image is not only fragmented but physically wounded. Here, the cut activates the image as more than a visual surface; it becomes thing-like, bodily, hinged, wounded, and potentially animated. As I will explore in my analysis of *Collective portrait* and *Baby in*

⁵⁵⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 144.

⁵⁵⁵ See Chapter 4, for a discussion of Glissant's notion of opacity.

⁵⁵⁶ See Chapter 4, for a discussion of Glissant's critique of Western Enlightenment thought, particularly and its relation to transparency, universality, and reduction of alterity.

⁵⁵⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143.

Belly, the effect is not one of visual rupture alone but of *provisional articulation*: a subsequent pinning that simulates bodily wholeness while materially withholding it. This mode of disturbance differs from the sonic force of the cry, to which I now turn—an uncontained excess that resists even the provisional structures Orupabo’s three-dimensional cut retains. Where in Orupabo’s three-dimensional cut fragments are lifted into relief, introducing a spatial tension, this is radicalized in her installations, where fragmentation unfolds more overtly across physical space producing affect through a different modality.⁵⁵⁸

6.5 The cry and the cut: bodily resonance beyond representation

In Patrick Crowley’s reading of Glissant, drawing on Danial Arango’s ‘*L’opacité chez Édouard Glissant ou la poétique de la souche*, opacity is not merely a withholding of meaning. Rather, “Opacité expresses what has been erased from official history and, specifically, the wounds of history that can only come forth through the poetic *cri*...,” articulating the mass of the unspoken and the repressed.⁵⁵⁹ In this reading, Opacity is not simply a medium that shelters expression, but the *cri* itself—its matter, form, and force. As Arango argues:

‘L’Opacité n’est pas seulement matière (et matière première) du cri, mais ce cri lui-même et son organisation même. Non seulement matière, mais forme. Non seulement le dit, mais le dire. L’opacité marque (est) le défolement même: racine obscure du cri..⁵⁶⁰

Or in translation:

Opacity it not only the matter (and raw matter) of the *cri*, but the *cri* itself and its very organization. Not only the material, but the form. Not only the said, but the saying. Opacity is the eruption itself: the obscure root of the *cri*..⁵⁶¹

This reading emphasizes that opacity constitutes an irreducible mode of articulation inseparable from the affective force it carries. The *cri*, which Arango traces to the suffering of the transatlantic slave trade, insists on a presence that refuses the stabilizing comprehension of hegemonic thought, persisting where language, memory and official history fail.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ See my analysis of *Of Course Everything is Real* (2024) in Section 7.3, where I discuss how Orupabo’s installation practice deepens the spatial logic of the cut, staging an affective and perceptual unmooring that is always incomplete and refuses resolution.

⁵⁵⁹ Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 108.

⁵⁶⁰ Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 108 Arango as quoted in Crowley.

⁵⁶¹ My translation, with assistance by AI tools.

⁵⁶² Crowley, “Édouard Glissant,” 108.

Importantly, the *cri* is not a clearly discernible utterance that can be decoded; it is an affective eruption in which opacity is the *cri* itself and its very organization.⁵⁶³ Like Glissant's larger discussion of opacity, analyzed in the Chapter 4, the *cri* resituates relation, by challenging what he defines as the Western imperative to comprehend and reduce the Other to the model of transparency. Rather than withdrawing from relation, the *cri* fosters a non-assimilative, "transversal" relation across differences that refuse to yield to hierarchy.⁵⁶⁴

The *cri*, understood as an extra-lingual affective register, pushes beyond the structured relationality underpinning Grønstad's ethical cut. In his account, aesthetic form remains the site through which alterity is mediated and ethically engaged within representation by inscribing "extra-linguistic ethical discourses into the very fabric of their aesthetic form."⁵⁶⁵ Grønstad's analysis of *Amour* emphasizes how cinema employs "oblique representation" to stage an ethical encounter marked by uncertainty and indirection facilitated through the on-screen relation between characters, capturing alterity within the film's formal configurations.⁵⁶⁶ The *cri* operates otherwise; it designates an affective register that disrupts the very conditions of representational mediation, producing a fugitive resonance that agitates the limits of language and representation itself. In this way, historical suffering acquires significance not through meaning, to which it cannot be reduced, but through the affective and relational forces it generates.⁵⁶⁷ In both accounts, the relational dynamic unsettles the hierarchical subject-object structure of knowledge as it designates a mode of engagement that evades mastery. However, they locate this differently. While Grønstad situates the ethical encounter within a relational space structured by cinematic form, the *cri* designates an affective articulation that agitates the limits of representational mediation, insisting on a presence that cannot be ignored. In the context of art, this relational dimension displaces the question from what suffering *means* toward how it is materially and affectively encountered and responded to. While Grønstad's ethical cut foregrounds form as a site of relational ethics,

⁵⁶³ Crowley here is drawing on Daniel Arango's interpretation of Glissant where opacité is not merely the material of the *cri*, but the *cri* itself —its matter, form, and force.

⁵⁶⁴ Crowley, "Édouard Glissant," 111. See Chapter 3, where I discuss Glissant's account of Creole speech as a form of opacity that does not refuse relation but inhabits it differently; by inhabiting a space of ambiguity and sonic excess.

⁵⁶⁵ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 5–7.

⁵⁶⁶ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 144.

⁵⁶⁷ In this sense the *cri* resonates with Emmanuel Lévinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (Routledge, 1988), 157–58. In *Useless suffering* Lévinas argues that suffering cannot be reduced to meaning or purpose as it resists active engagement through understanding. In this sense, suffering unfolds as a *disruption of meaning*, compelling us to relate to it —not as an issue to be resolved, but as a condition that demands our response.

conceiving cinema as a precarious space of “extra-linguistic” exchange between image and viewer, it nevertheless situates this encounter within the representational event of the image itself. Orupabo’s material cut, by contrast, unsettles the very conditions under which the image can function as the primary site of ethical encounter as it refuses resolution or recognition within normative visual regimes.⁵⁶⁸ This fugitivity within opacity moves beyond rupture in meaning toward bodily resonance: an irreducible difference encountered as affective excess that resists representation.⁵⁶⁹

This fugitivity also resonates with Fred Moten’s theorization of “the cry” —a phonic and affective resonance that “moves in excess of meaning,” resisting capture by epistemological or visual regimes.⁵⁷⁰ Before continuing it is important to note that Crowley’s reading of Glissant’s *cri* and Moten’s theorization of the cry do not operate within the same conceptual framework. Although Moten has acknowledged Glissant’s influence elsewhere, he does not explicitly cite Glissant’s *cri* as an inspiration in his account of the cry. My juxtaposition therefore marks a structural resonance that is productive precisely because it is non-identical.

Using the posthumous photograph of Emmett Till’s mutilated body as his point of departure, Moten critiques what he calls the “analytical-interpretive” and ocular-centric approach to photography, a mode of reading that he claims reduces the photograph to its visual content. Moten contends that this mode of approach forecloses its deeper performative and affective dimensions.⁵⁷¹ Against this, Moten draws attention to what he describes as the photograph’s “phonic”, performative, and resistant force —elements he claims are obscured under an interpretive gaze oriented toward visual legibility. This reorientation opens a space to explore how photographs such as the image of young Till’s brutally beaten body operate beyond the purely visual, unsettling visual and analytical frameworks attempting to fix meaning.⁵⁷²

Moten ties photography’s *disruptive potential* to what he describes as photography’s “cry from outside” — a phonic and affective resonance that disrupts visual and analytical frameworks. Rather than stabilizing into structured comprehension, the cry diffuses across

⁵⁶⁸ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 5.

⁵⁶⁹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 20; Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” 34; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 133.

⁵⁷⁰ Moten, *In The Break*, 186.

⁵⁷¹ Moten, *In The Break*, 186.

⁵⁷² Moten, *In The Break*, 186–87 On page 187 Moten elaborates on the “phonic” dimension of photographs: “the augmentation of mourning by the sound of moaning, by a religious and political formulation of morning that animates the photograph with a powerfully material resistance.”

time and bodies, unfolding beyond the purely ocular.⁵⁷³ Moten describes this disruptive force, which he views as the irreducible “phonic substance” of objection, through his corporeal response to a post-mortem photography of Emmett Till:

Looking at Emmett Till is arrested by overtone reverberations; looking demurs when looking opens onto an unheard sound that the picture cannot secure but discovers and onto all of what it might be said to mean that I can look at this face, this photograph.⁵⁷⁴

Here, the cry is not a literal sound, but an “unheard” vibratory force—a presence the image cannot contain but nevertheless opens onto. “Overtone reverberation” describes a sonic and affective surplus that exceeds visual legibility and serves as a visual trace of performance.⁵⁷⁵ As Moten writes, the cry is a force that the image cannot “secure” but only *discovers*.⁵⁷⁶ It does not stabilize meaning, but disturbs it, moving through the body and unsettling the conditions of representation itself.⁵⁷⁷ In this sense, Moten’s cry helps illuminate how Orupabo’s three-dimensional cut resists a purely ocular approach: it is a tactile, affective surplus that exceeds the visual field. Like a sound wave, it generates “overtone” reverberations that move through the body, disturbing the limits of the visual plane.⁵⁷⁸ The viewer does not only see the rupture; they feel it as disturbance. The cut thus becomes a charged site of embodied resonance, akin to how Moten’s notion of the cry agitates the photograph from within it.

Yet there is a significant difference. While Moten’s cry emerges from within the photographic materiality—a vibratory force the image discovers—Orupabo’s cut is a deliberate material intervention into the image itself. Her cut produces fragmentation that does not collapse into narrative disintegration, nor resolve into visual coherence. Instead, it

⁵⁷³ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

⁵⁷⁴ Moten, *In The Break*, 186.

⁵⁷⁵ Moten, *In The Break*, 186 While Fred Moten does not explicitly cite Glissant’s theorization of the cry, however he has repeatedly described Glissant as a major influence. In a 2018 interview for Mice Magazine conducted by Nehal El-Hadi in relation to his trilogy:— *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018) and *The Universal Machine* (2018)—Moten describes opacity as “both desirable and unavoidable,” and reflects on Glissant’s phrase “consent à n’être plus un seul” as an invitation into non-singular being. Moten’s ongoing engagement with affect, resonance, relational multiplicity, and the disruption of ontological coherence resonates with Glissant’s notion of opacity even where citation is indirect. Notably, the cry as an audiovisual affective rupture is discussed explicitly in *Black and Blur*. See “Ensemble: an Interview with Dr. Fred Moten: <https://micemagazine.ca/issue-four/ensemble-interview-dr-fred-moten>.

⁵⁷⁶ Moten, *In The Break*, 186 In such Moten’s theorization of the cry suggests an opening onto alterity that resonates with Levinas’ face-to-face relation.

⁵⁷⁷ Moten, *In The Break*, 186.

⁵⁷⁸ Moten, *In The Break*, 198.

holds presence in tension —between recognition and the ungraspable vibration that insists beyond the optical.

This tension becomes particularly palpable in Orupabo's large-scale installation *Of course everything is real* (2024,) composed of facial features fragmented across multiple planes. As I explore in detail in Section 7.3, the three-dimensional cut is here expanded into a fully spatial configuration. Unlike her hinged collages, where fragments are held in provisional articulation or suspension by split pins, the installation disperses facial features across the room using metal supports, eliminating any structural cohesion, and asserting the mode of uncontained excess. In this context, the cut becomes immersive. As the viewer moves through the work —quite literally stepping into the cut between fragmented facial features—disruption becomes embodied, challenging the constraint of a purely ocular approach. In its overtly spatial form, Orupabo's three-dimension cut transforms the work into more than a visual composition; it becomes a spatial, temporal, and phenomenological force, unfolding continuously as the viewer navigates the fractured terrain and insists on a presence that resists resolution.

6.5.1 Opacity and the Colonial archive

Where previous sections have considered how Orupabo's cuts unsettle visual mastery through fragmentation and suspension, this section grounds that refusal in Glissant's critique of transparency as a colonial mechanism of power. Drawing on Glissant, the cut is reconfigured as an epistemologically based refusal that challenges the classificatory and disciplinary logics of the archive itself. As Glissant argues, the demand for transparency is rooted in the colonizer's need to make the Other knowable and "understandable" on their own terms; to assimilate difference into an "ideal scale" that allows for measurement, comparison, and ultimately, judgment.⁵⁷⁹ Historically, Sekula observes, the photographic archive functioned as instruments of power, disciplining bodies and rendering them legible within systems of control.⁵⁸⁰ The compulsion to reduce and grasp, Crowley observes, is summed up by Glissant's concept of *comprendre*, which in its etymological sense describes a process of "taking and drawing together."⁵⁸¹ Glissant contends that this process inevitably

⁵⁷⁹ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

⁵⁸⁰ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."

⁵⁸¹ Crowley, "Édouard Glissant, 107

reduces the Other's complexity into something that the colonizer can fully grasp, categorize, and control. Discussing artistic works, Glissant suggests that a work may not aim at clarity; rather, it may act as a disruptive force aimed at "dismant[ling]...infinite forms of oppression."⁵⁸²

Orupabo's gesture of the cut resists this demand for legibility. Rather than permitting the fragment to settle into coherent and readable form, her cut introduces opacity as disruption, refusing the colonial archive's representational authority and its claim to totalizing knowledge. In doing so, it interrupts the archive's capacity to stabilize meaning by disorganizing the conditions under which meaning can be secured. As Orupabo has stated:

I am concerned with the damage and consequences of being determined from the outside, but I also look into the possibility of resistance —how we challenge and re-create. I am trying to make works that speak to the reality I know. I aim for complexities....and I try to speak of the interaction and clash between past and present, between self-representation and imposed representation⁵⁸³

As discussed earlier, Orupabo's cut does not remain within fragmentation alone. It does not exist in isolation — it is followed by a re-contextualization where the fragment is set into a new constellation. This refusal of isolation, rather than resolving rupture, intensifies it by resisting settling into visual coherence or stable form. In this way, the cut functions as an affective eruption that does not just intervene within aesthetic form; it generates a space characterized by fugitive resonance that refuses the compulsion to grasp and, instead, asserts an uncontained excess where meaning is not only deferred but actively unmade.

Arthur Jafa, writing in a different but resonant register, frames Orupabo's practice not as an act of reconstruction, but an "emancipatory" engagement with historical imagery —one that resists the legibility imposed by dominant visual regimes and refuses archival fixity. This intervention mirrors the philosophical stance of the poetic *cri*, which operates as an epistemological refusal of the colonial demand for transparency (as discussed in Section 6.5). What Jafa describes as Orupabo's emancipatory gesture recalls the Black Audio Film Communities' approach to working with official archival material. As Kobena Mercer notes, "Far from playing an anchoring or fixative role, as it does in documentary realism, BAFC'S aestheticized handling of the archive imparts a dynamic and liberating energy to these "unknowable" fragments."⁵⁸⁴ Like Orupabo's methodology, the BAFC refrained from

⁵⁸² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 107.

⁵⁸³ Das, "BOMB Magazine | New Readings, New Meanings."

⁵⁸⁴ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 230.

stabilizing or recuperating lost meaning, allowing images to escape their institutional contexts. A Mercer elaborates;

Instead of a synthesis of memory and history, the collective's films underscore an irreconcilable agonism, for gaps, absences, distortions, fabrications, and contradictions arise on all sides: the forces of erasure, forgetting, and denial are as active in shaping family mythologies contained in snapshots and home movies as they are in shaping national mythologies that are based on the selective filtering of the collective past.⁵⁸⁵

This refusal of synthesis, of neatly resolving the archive's omissions and contradictions, resonates with the affective and formal tensions in Orupabo's work: Reflecting on Orupabo's Instagram practice, Jafa describes it as "a mobile repository, a litany of residua, a voluptuous trail of black continuity.....not so much an archive as an ark, a borne witness to the singularity that is blackness."⁵⁸⁶ By framing Orupabo's process as an "ark," Jafa underscores Orupabo's recontextualizing of found image fragments, shifting them away from the archive's disciplinary function toward a space of survival and uncontained excess. Jafa's framing underscores that Orupabo's recontextualizing of found image fragments does not restore identity but instead sustains a form of *presence grounded in affect* — what he describes as a "a rolling deep, limbic expressway" — as well as in opacity and disruption. Rather than seeking clarity and ordered narrative demanded by the colonial ideal of transparency, her practice sustains a singular, irreducible presence. This presence unfolds through fragmentation, repetition, and resonance; a presence that, as Jafa puts it, bears "witness to the singularity that is blackness."⁵⁸⁷ In this sense, Orupabo activates the archive as a site of unruly epistemic resistance. The resulting "unknowable" fragments generated through this process unsettle the visual order of the colonial gaze by resisting the compulsion toward cognitive closure and refusing the epistemic domestication of difference.

While Jafa emphasizes the affective and poetic dimensions of Orupabo's resistance, her cut also performs a material and structural intervention, disrupting the archival systems that historically disciplined and fixed racialized bodies. Although Orupabo's juxtapositional cut resonates with BAFC's use of archival imagery — whose handling, as Mercer observes, imparts a dynamic and liberating energy to these 'unknowable' fragments"⁵⁸⁸ — her three-dimensional cut extends the affective destabilization into a deeper critique of the visual logic

⁵⁸⁵ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 229.

⁵⁸⁶ Jafa, "Some Very Preliminary Thoughts on the Work of Frida Orupabo, Missylanyus, Ming Smith."

⁵⁸⁷ Jafa, "Some Very Preliminary Thoughts on the Work of Frida Orupabo, Missylanyus, Ming Smith."

⁵⁸⁸ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 230.

of the archive itself, interrogating the classificatory structures that erase differences into sameness and shape what can be seen and known.⁵⁸⁹

This dynamic is materially disrupted in works such as Orupabo's *Untitled 2018* (Figure 6), where the face of a Black woman is constructed using images that seem to hail from different archival sources. The three-dimensional cut is not hidden or healed, it is held open, exposing fragmentation not as damage to be repaired, but as a refusal to cohere. This aesthetic refusal counters the visual logics of classification, resemblance, and legibility central to the colonial archive. Instead of offering a fixed and stable subject, the collage sustains a fractured opacity that withholds and unsettles.⁵⁹⁰

I return to this work in Section 7.1, where I examine how Orupabo's cut functions as both an aesthetic rupture and an epistemic refusal grounded in opacity. As Allan Sekula argues in "The body and the Archive", the archive is not a neutral repository but a system of power that disciplines and regulates bodies, rendering them legible within state and colonial frameworks.

⁵⁹¹ These frameworks do not function independently. They are deeply entwined with discourses of racial difference and operate through the creation of homogenizing typologies that serve as devices of regulatory control. As discussed in Chapter 3, within this system, the body is placed in an archive that emphasizes their similarity to —or difference from —other 'things' in order to endow coherence or meaning to seemingly random components. In this context the body is not merely 'seen' — it is measured, categorized, and ascribed hierarchal value; creating and enforcing similarities and difference between self and Other, consolidating colonial power through visual surveillance and classification. Orupabo's cut resists this logic by fragmenting the image and, more fundamentally, disrupting the very conditions of visibility imposed by archival and colonial knowledge systems. As discussed in my Chapter 4 on Opacity, Glissant critique of transparency offers a crucial framework for understanding how Orupabo's cut functions as an aesthetic disruption and as an epistemic refusal, thereby refusing the demand for legibility, coherence, and mastery *that transforms the seen body to the known body*.

⁵⁸⁹ As discussed in Section 6.4.3, the temporal logic underpinning Orupabo's engagement with archival imagery also diverges significantly from that of the BAFC and Akomfrah.

⁵⁹⁰ I return to this in my analysis "Collective portraits" and "Baby in Belly" where I discuss how Orupabo's three-dimensional cut materially disrupts the fixing imperative of the scientific and colonial gaze.

⁵⁹¹ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."

6.5.2 Beyond retrieval: The archive, silenced voices, and the Cut

This epistemic refusal is not merely a rejection but an *ethical stance* that challenges the colonial archive's impulse to fully comprehend, classify, and appropriate. Earlier, I outlined how, Édouard Glissant insists that opacity —defined as the resistance to being understood on the terms of the other—is a refusal of epistemic mastery. Gayatri Spivak, on the other hand, warns that the inability to speak can be a product of historical and ideological erasure. Where Spivak foregrounds the subaltern's exclusion from dominant social discourse, attributing to hegemonic power structures the power to “constitute[e] and disarticulate[e]” the subaltern,⁵⁹² Glissant's concept operates differently: opacity, as an ethical commitment, limits the dominant's ability to fully comprehend the subaltern.⁵⁹³ This difference is crucial, positioning opacity as a necessary epistemological shield against the project of categorization and totalizing knowledge, resisting the very foundation of colonial visual hegemony.

The archive does not neutrally record history; it actively produces historical knowledge through classificatory and exclusionary logics that reflect the power structures that shaped it. As Saidiya Hartman notes in her reading of Spivak, there may therefore be no *unmediated* access to subaltern histories “outside dominant representations or elite documents”.⁵⁹⁴ Because the colonial archive documents are fundamentally shaped by imperialist world views, any attempt to recuperate lost voices through archival retrieval risks reinforcing — rather than undoing — the historical mechanisms of oppression.

In an interview with Alayo Akinkugbe, Orupabo discussed her engagement with the colonial archive, stating that she sees her use of the collage as a form of liberation, re-creation, and resistance;

There's something about working with colonial archives which is so objectifying and so violent; by the use of collage, I am trying to break those images up, to *create new and more complex ways of seeing* and imagining.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 10–11; Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*.

⁵⁹³ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 20; Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” 34.

⁵⁹⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 10–11.

⁵⁹⁵ Akinkugbe, “Frida Orupabo, the Artist Reconfiguring Colonial Legacies Through Collage” My italic.

Orupabo's cut does not seek to restore lost presence or recover what the archive has — following Spivak—"silenced".⁵⁹⁶ Instead, it performs an epistemological rupture aligned with Glissant's demand for opacity as an ethical mode of resistance. This is not a retreat into illegibility but an insistence on relation without comparison, hierarchy, and the impetus to translate difference into sameness. As Orupabo puts it:

I created a space where I could be without being devalued; a place where I could challenge and deconstruct the "white gaze" on blackness, and on self.⁵⁹⁷

Her statement reinforces that the cut is not only an aesthetic gesture, but an act of self-preservation and resistance to the white gaze. As Drabinski notes in his reading of Glissant, opacity is a generative force, one that fragments authoritarian gazes and knowledge regimes while simultaneously producing new ways of relating in difference.⁵⁹⁸ In this sense, the cut does not only disrupt the archival authority of the image; it reconfigures it. While severing, it opens onto a space where the *image remains present yet not fully graspable* — an ethical withholding that resists colonial modes of knowledge while still maintaining presence.

This aligns with my earlier discussion on opacity as a condition for an ethics of relation without domination. Opacity manifests not as withdrawal but as a resistant presence that unsettles the objectifying logics of transparency. Rather than reducing the subject to something knowable, Orupabo's situates the subject within what Glissant terms the "stubborn shadows" — the indeterminate space between legibility and illegibility, visibility, and refusal

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Yet Orupabo's engagement with the archive does not stop at refusal. While her cut disrupts the colonial gaze, it also initiates a process of recontextualization — where archival fragments are not fixed within a single composition but instead *recur, circulate, and transform across multiple works and platforms*. More than an aesthetic strategy, this recurrence operates as an extension of the cut itself. Through the repeated reuse of photographic fragments across multiple compositions, Orupabo extends the cut beyond a singular moment — transforming it into a practice that unfolds over time. This movement

⁵⁹⁶ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

⁵⁹⁷ Tchokokam, "A conversation with Frida Orupabo."

⁵⁹⁸ Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage*, 190.

⁵⁹⁹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24–25; Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 4.

between excision and reuse is central to understanding the dynamic afterlife of the images she engages with.

6.5.3 Recurrence as an extension of the cut

While Orupabo's cuts create visible fissures within individual collages, her re-use of the same photographic fragments across multiple works extends this process beyond a single artwork. The recurrence of elements such as the hands and comb in *Untitled* (2018) supports my claim that Orupabo's cuts do not function as final ruptures but rather as ongoing, relational gestures — positioning her practice as a form of critical invention that continuously reshapes meaning through digital and material recombination.⁶⁰⁰

Rather than signaling an endpoint, her excisions initiate a process of persistence, where fragments recur, shift and accumulate new meanings over time. In this sense, the archival images Orupabo engages with may be understood as what Grønstad terms “unfinished inscriptions” — temporarily stabilized yet always open for “future reappropriation”, as he observes in his discussion of John Akomfrah's *Nine Muses*.⁶⁰¹ While Grønstad emphasizes that Akomfrah's work has a “processual dimension” unfolding across several iterations that reconfigure archival material into new constellations of historical meaning, he notes that:

a poetics of recombination is a vital aspect of the ethical imagination, both because the practice challenges institutionally mediated, sanctioned accounts of history and because it never settles for any definitive, irrevocable, and unified narrative of individual or collective experience. A recombinatory aesthetics keeps the authority of definition perpetually deferred. (p 195)

Orupabo's practice likewise involves recombination, but its ethical force lies less in re-narrativizing historical fragments than in sustaining their fragmentation. By cutting elements out of their original images, she unmoors them from their archival and historical contexts, so

⁶⁰⁰ Kember and Zylińska outline a “more dynamic, networked, and engaged mode of working on, in, and with ‘the media,’ in which critique is always already explicitly accompanied by the work of participation and invention.” See Kember and Zylińska, *Life after New Media*, xvii.

⁶⁰¹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 197 Grønstad develops the notion of the archival image as an “unfinished inscription” in his discussion of John Akomfrah's film *The Nine Muses*, where he describes how archival images remain provisionally fixed yet open to future reappropriation. While Orupabo's practice similarly refuses closure, her approach differs in that she does not seek to reconfigure the archive through recombinatory aesthetics. Instead, her cuts sustain fragmentation as an ongoing mode of engagement, where meaning remains unsettled rather than deferred. In this sense, her engagement with the unfinished inscription is not about historical reworking but about sustaining rupture and resisting epistemic mastery. For further discussion of Akomfrah's practice, see “The ethics of matter and memory” in Grønstad's *Film and the ethical imagination*.

that the emphasis falls less on recombination into shifting constellations of historical narrative than on sustaining fragmentation and rupture as a persistent mode of engagement, where meaning is continually unsettled and withheld. This *processual persistence* ensures that her cut unfolds as a continuous reconfiguration of fragments that resists closure.⁶⁰²

Importantly, while the same faces, body parts and objects reappear in different contexts, their original sources remain unknown. Orupabo rarely discloses where she has found a fragment, preventing any attempt to trace the images back to a singular archival origin. Instead, they circulate as displaced and unsettled signs. When the same photographic fragment appears in different collages, its indexicality becomes unstable. It no longer refers back to one image, one person or one specific historical moment in time. In this sense, Orupabo's cutting does not simply (re)mediate images but actively reconfigures their epistemological status, disrupting the very structures that have historically sought to fix racialized subjects within knowable forms. This methodological orientation —approaching the cut as a formal operation with ethical weight— provides the ground for my analysis section, where I trace how it unfolds across specific works.

⁶⁰² This dimension will be developed further in the analysis section, where I discuss how recurrence unfolds across specific works.

7.0 Configurations of Cutting

The works discussed in this chapter are selected because each stages a distinct configuration of cutting. This allows the analysis to trace how the act of cutting reorganizes spatial relations, the material surface, and conditions of viewing. Rather than offering a comprehensive survey of the artist's oeuvre, the chapter focuses on works that make it possible to open up cutting as a material practice and to consider how its formal strategies shape the visual and relational dynamics of the artwork.

7.1 The collective portrait

Frida Orupabo's process of layering and combining photographic fragments from multiple individuals may be understood as a form of collective portraiture. Many of the images she works with, including ethnographic and medical photographs, originate from colonial archives shaped by visual regimes that sought to classify and regulate racialized bodies.⁶⁰³ In this regard, her practice bears formal and structural similarities to the composite photographs of the founder of eugenics Francis Galton.⁶⁰⁴ While I have previously discussed Orupabo's collages in relation to what Grønstad defines as the ethical cut, this section focuses on how this dimension can be interpreted as being played out visually, materially, and affectively in two specific works: *Untitled* (2018) and *Two Heads* (2022). Taking Orupabo's techniques of appropriation, cutting, and pinning as my point of departure, I will discuss what I describe as an ethics of form articulated through Orupabo's practice in relation to the visual regimes of science and colonialism. These are regimes that sought to erase difference by subsuming racialized bodies into typological classification. This analysis engages with the intersubjective, relational effects that emerge through these works.

To briefly reiterate, Galton's method was deeply rooted in the scientific and colonial gaze. As Sekula observes, it involved the successive exposure and layering of multiple portraits onto a single photographic plate to create a composite image of individuals associated with social

⁶⁰³ For a more detailed discussion of photography in the context of race and colonial visual regimes and Galton's composite portraits, see Chapter 3, especially Section 3.1.4-3.1.6.

⁶⁰⁴ In 1883 Galton coins the word "eugenics" in a footnote of his book *Inquiries into human faculties and its development*. Here he writes that "the word eugenics would sufficiently express the idea of giving "the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had". See Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 24–25.

categories such as race.⁶⁰⁵ The resulting image, which Galton described as a “pictorial statistics,” depicted “no man in particular” but instead produced a “generalized average,” a “physiognomic type” meant to represent the group’s shared characteristics.⁶⁰⁶ By presenting these averaged features as statistically grounded, Galton’s method reinforced racialized taxonomies through a visual logic of coherence that linked physical appearance to intellectual hierarchies and moral traits.⁶⁰⁷ Sekula further notes, Galton used this “naturalizing” evidence to “prop[os]e a general quantitative hierarchy of intelligence, and [apply it] to racial groups.”⁶⁰⁸

A distinct feature of Galton’s composites was their slightly *blurred* appearance—a byproduct of the process in which individual variation was flattened or effaced in such a way that they appeared as overarching physiognomic types. While ostensibly a technical artifact, this blur was, as Sekula has argued, central to what can be understood as the ideological project of abstraction, in which the particular is erased in favor of generalization. Extending this reading, I suggest that the composite image not only flattens particularity, but also participates in what might be understood as a visual regime of control. This regime disciplines the visual field and reinforces the colonial gaze’s demand for mastery.⁶⁰⁹

Orupabo, by contrast, rejects the seamless surface. Where Galton’s method, as Sekula has argued, effaced difference in the service of a totalizing representation, her approach—the cutting, layering, and pinning of photographic images—foregrounds the constructed nature of the work.⁶¹⁰ Through this technique, what I have described elsewhere as her three-dimensional cut, the fragments are quite literally lifted into relief, introducing a spatial tension. This spatial and material disjunction opens a site of instability and uncertainty where the image is held together by pins in a provisional manner, never fully resolving into a unified whole. Instead of smoothing over disjunctions, she exposes them, leaving traces of articulation visible. Seen this way, Orupabo’s method can be understood as materially resisting the visual logic of typological classification by insisting on the fragment as a site of

⁶⁰⁵ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 19.

⁶⁰⁶ Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” 138; Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 47.

⁶⁰⁷ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 44, 46.

⁶⁰⁸ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 19, 44–46.

⁶⁰⁹ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, 342; Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 19, 47–50.

⁶¹⁰ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 47–48.

irreducible difference. Drawing on Sekula, one might understand this as a disruption of the coherence that sustains totalizing representation.



Figure 6: Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2018 Collage with paper and pins, mounted on aluminum, 77cm x 39cm. Private collection. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

7.1.1 From composite photography to ethics of the cut

Whereas Galton's composites dissolved specificity into a blurred visual average, Orupabo's *Untitled 2018* (Figure 6) foregrounds fragmentation as a material and affective disruption of visual coherence. A three-quarter-view portrait of a Black woman, constructed from multiple photographic fragments. Incision-like cuts divide her face into four distinct sections, creating the impression that a woman is peering out from behind the surface. Three additional elements appear to form the hair that surrounds her face. The density and texture of these fragments distinguish them from the face, suggesting they may originate from dissimilar sources. This visual contrast draws attention to the work's layered construction. Rather than forming a coherent whole, the facial features and surrounding hair-like elements remain visually fragmented, resisting stabilization into a singular or stable representation.⁶¹¹ The cut, however, does more than rupture; it multiplies and dislocates the facial features, unsettling assumed continuities between surface and depth, between the color of the epidermis and the interior referent, between referent and image.

The work's method of assembly, its layering and pinning, reinforces this resistance to coherence by introducing a physical articulation absent in Galton's method of successive exposure. His composites relied on imperceptible layering; differences were dissolved into one another, leaving behind a slightly blurred "average" designed to convey a unified physiognomic type.⁶¹² Orupabo, by contrast, exposes the constructed nature of the work. Her use of metal split pins does not conceal the act of assembly but foregrounds it, marking the joins as visible and unresolved. Rather than being seamlessly fused into a singular entity, the overt ruptures and pinning techniques ensure that the work remains provisional, dynamic, and materially contingent, held together not by coherence, but by an articulation that remains in flux. The collage's force lies not in what is torn, *but in what refuses to become whole*. It lies in the persistent instability of form that resists visual resolution. Rather than offering visual mastery, the work performs an opacity that asserts presence without yielding to transparency, ensuring that the subject is never fully stabilized within the visual field.

⁶¹¹ The fragmentation in *Untitled (2018)* resists any singular or stable representation, aligning with Orupabo's broader practice of destabilizing indexicality and unsettling the structures that have historically sought to fix racialized subjects within knowable forms (see section 6.5.3)

⁶¹² Daston and Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," 138; Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 19.

Where Galton's blur concealed the traces of the composite process by smoothing over discontinuities, Orupabo's cut lays bare the material fractures, resisting the scientific gaze's erasure of difference. While this fragmentation unsettles coherence, it does not efface the subject. By disrupting the assumed continuity between epidermis and depth, referent and image, the cut fractures the photograph's indexical authority, drawing attention to the limits of schemas of visibility and to how complexities risk being flattened within the racialized visual field.

This imperative toward legibility, toward fixing the racialized and gendered subject into a coherent, knowable type, underpins what Orupabo names as "the damage and consequences of being determined from the outside." In an interview in *BOMB* magazine, Orupabo speaks directly to the violence of these projections:

Through the distortion and manipulation of images, my work tries to say something about different social constructions—race, gender, sexuality, beauty, class. I aim to explore their interconnectedness as well as to look at white fantasies about Blackness, specifically the black female body. I am concerned with the damage and consequences of being determined from the outside, but I also look into the possibility of resistance—how we challenge and re-create. I am trying to make works that speak to the reality I know. I aim for complexities.....and I try to speak of the interaction and clash between past and present, between self-representation and imposed representation ⁶¹³

7.1.2 Opacity and the refusal of legibility

Édouard Glissant's demand for *opacity* offers a way of engaging with the complexities and disruptions in Orupabo's collages. Approaching these formal strategies through the lens of opacity foregrounds their resistance to epistemic closure. As discussed in Chapter 4, respecting the right to opacity is not a refusal of relation, but an ethical commitment to irreducibility and a rejection of totalizing knowledge.⁶¹⁴

Where Galton's composites functioned as epistemological instruments designed to extract a visual essence and stabilize typologies into a coherent, legible form, Orupabo's method introduces non-sites that unsettle such stabilization. Rather than converging into a unified whole, the fragments sustain a material instability in which meaning remains in flux.⁶¹⁵ This method operates through opacity, resisting the colonial gaze's imperative to render racialized

⁶¹³ Das, "BOMB Magazine | New Readings, New Meanings."

⁶¹⁴ See Chapter 4 where I discuss Glissant's concept of opacity as an ethical refusal of epistemic mastery.

⁶¹⁵ On how Orupabo's cut can be seen to resist epistemic containment and narrative resolution, see Section 6.5.2 "Beyond retrieval."

others as what Glissant describes as “homogeneous, and thoroughly knowable.”⁶¹⁶ The work can be seen as opening a relational opacity — one in which difference is neither assimilated nor entirely withdrawn, but persists as a presence that is visible yet not fully knowable.⁶¹⁷ As Celia Britton observes in her reading of Glissant, opacity provides a crucial mode of resistance to the colonial gaze and its demand to fix racialized Others within recognizable and controllable forms. This resistance unsettles the epistemic violence of visibility in which the racialized Other is rendered paradoxically hyper visible and invisible, seen but not seen.

Britton argues that opacity;

confronts the stereotype’s attempt to fix racial difference with a self-representation that cannot be fixed because it is deliberately unintelligible.⁶¹⁸

Moreover:

[Opacity] transforms the status of the colonized subject’s visibility from a source of vulnerability[...] to the active production of a visible but *unreadable* image....An unknowable presence within the visible presence of the colonized.⁶¹⁹

Through this shift Britton reclaims visibility from a condition of ontological vulnerability — where the colonized subject was seen but denied full being —and instead, asserts an unreadable presence that resists epistemic capture. This implies that opacity is not a withdrawal but a disruption: a way of inhabiting visibility without yielding to its demand for transparency.

⁶¹⁶ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 77.

⁶¹⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 171.

⁶¹⁸ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24.

⁶¹⁹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24–25.

7.1.3 From rupture to subtle disjunction: Layering and the limits of legibility in *Two Heads* (2022)



Figure 7. Frida Orupabo, *Two heads*, 2022, framed collage with paper pins, 99x50cm. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

Where *Untitled 2018* foregrounds material disjunction, with ruptures and pinning clearly visible, *Two heads 2022* (Figure 7) introduces a subtler form of fragmentation that defers disruption rather than displaying it overtly. In this later work, the layering is so refined that the surface initially appears seamless: the fragments are similarly scaled and meticulously arranged to avoid any discrepancy in alignment. On closer engagement, however, the mirrored composition reveals subtle discontinuities that unsettle rather than fracture the image.⁶²⁰ The absence of a torso directs attention to the form of the head and its facial features, recalling anthropometric and ethnographic modes of scientific visualization. The figure is pictured in a frontal view, devoid of contextual markers that might anchor her in time and place. She stares directly at the viewer with a furrowed brow and stern demeanor. With her head held high, she confronts the viewer, adopting a pose and bearing that inscribes dignity and authority. While this frontal orientation echoes ethnographic and scientific photographs used to classify and control, *Two Heads* resists such capture. On the gallery wall, and at a scale that far exceeds those used to illustrate ethnographic or pseudo-scientific texts, the work transforms the dynamics of viewing. No longer a specimen to be scrutinized, the figure asserts her presence as a subject, meeting the viewer's gaze with a quiet, unrelenting insistence. We are brought face-to-face, not with a type, but with an irreducible presence.

Indeed, the ruptures in *Two heads* unfold rather differently than in *Untitled 2018*, shifting from overt fragmentation to a materially subtle deferral of rupture. Two sharp, clean cuts, one below the eyes and another at the base of the neck, introduce material fissures: subtle breaches in the visual field. Unlike *Untitled 2018*, where fissures are immediately perceptible, *Two Heads* employs a near-seamless layering that defers rupture and resists instant recognition, producing a shallow but perceptible spatial depth within the surface of the image. This delicate layering does not restore wholeness but intervenes by withholding legibility. Rather than laying bare the material fractures, the composition sustains visual uncertainty. While compositionally calmer, this layering technique generates a sense of unease, arising from the tension between what is seen and what is withheld. Whether Orupabo works from a single face or layered fragments from multiple individuals remains

⁶²⁰ When installed directly on the wall, the collages possess a pronounced three-dimensional quality produced by layering, cutting, and pinning. This sense of depth is often diminished in photographic reproductions and may also be partially reduced when the works are presented behind glass in conventional frames, a factor relevant to the present readings of *Untitled, 2018*, and *Two Heads, 2022*.

unresolved. This uncertainty gives rise to a mode of looking that lingers and searches, destabilizing fixity without overtly disassembling the subject.

Instead of laying bare the material fractures, the cut in this work sustains an ongoing material negotiation between appearing and withdrawal that resists closure. Here, the cut unfolds less as an overt fissure than as a material disturbance that holds open a space of encounter and difference, where the racialized subject remains irreducible to the scientific gaze's desire to fix and classify. As Sekula observes, Galton's method elevated the photograph from an indexical trace into a symbolic representation of a type, transforming accumulated photographic traces into visual generality. This movement from singular to "typological" representation. As Sekula observes, underscores how the composite portrait was complicit in racial classification, erasing the particular in favor of visual abstractions of group identity.⁶²¹ In, contrast, Orupabo's method resists legibility through the material operations of cutting and layering.⁶²²

Didi-Huberman's notion of the "rend," discussed in Section 6.4.9, opens our encounter with Orupabo's *Two Heads* as implying a complicated legibility through an almost imperceptible material deferral of continuity. The image initially appears whole, yet small material breaches unsettle its cohesion, ensuring that it cannot be fully grasped or stabilized within a single frame of meaning. As Didi-Huberman suggests, "to think the fabric with its rend" is to recognize how this interruption unsettles meaning rather than foreclosing it.⁶²³ In this way, the rend opens up an understanding of Orupabo's cut as a material disturbance that exposes an ambivalent force within the image that insists on a presence that refuses assimilation into a coherent visual order. The cut, like the rend, becomes the condition of possibility for the emergence of an uncontainable presence, one that refuses to settle into a stable symbolic order and instead exposes the limits of representation. This quiet surfacing, what Didi-Huberman describes as the *Anadyomene movement*, does not erupt as spectacle but unfolds gradually, oscillating between submersion and resurfacing, hovering in the interstices between the visible and the visual.⁶²⁴

⁶²¹ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."

⁶²² Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 54–55.

⁶²³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 144.

⁶²⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 144.

This oscillating emergence unfolds with particular subtlety in *Two Heads*. The mirrored composition produces an unstable legibility, drawing the viewer into an unresolved encounter. Unlike the upper head in the composition, which bears subtle, surgical-like cuts — delicate breaches in the plane of representation— the lower head appears more continuous and whole. This formal contrast intensifies the work’s unsettling effect, revealing how decipherability and coherence remain uncertain, even in the absence of fragmentation. Unlike the overt ruptures in *Untitled 2018*, the disruptions in *Two Heads* unfold gradually, initially appearing as a seamless whole. The subtle material traces that emerge to the proximate viewer sustain a quiet deferral, where the work does not dissolve into fragmentation but holds it in suspension. If Galton’s blur produces an illusion of objective legibility by masking discontinuities, the near undetectable cuts in *Two Heads* disturb such an illusion, instead deepening the ambiguity of the depicted subject, staging an uneasy tension between what is seen and what is withheld.

At a material level, the mirrored composition creates the illusion of continuity, yet at an epistemological level, this very doubling destabilizes legibility. Even as the lower head appears intact, the mirror structure subtly distorts rather than clarifies, revealing how coherence remains precarious even in the absence of visible fragmentation. This shift from overt rupture to slight fissures alters the way the work unfolds, shifting our engagement from immediate recognition to a sustained, open-ended encounter that, as Didi-Huberman suggests, allows the work to “deploy itself in several dimensions, between the grasped visible and the lived ordeal of a relinquishment.”⁶²⁵

In Orupabo’s work, the three-dimensional cut does more than fragment; it sustains a rupture that remains open, refusing full disclosure or obscurity. Through Didi-Huberman’s concept of *the rend*, this cut can be understood as a *material disturbance* that exposes an ambivalent force within the image, resisting absorption into a coherent visual order. The cut, like the rend, does not sever or disclose but sustains a charged space of tension, where meaning remains unresolved.⁶²⁶ This state of hesitation, marked by an uneasy oscillation between coherence and fragmentation, enacts a form of opacity. Yet, opacity in *Two Heads* is more

⁶²⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 16.

⁶²⁶ For a more comprehensive discussion see Section 6.4.9 where I discuss Didi-Huberman’s concept of the rend in relation to Orupabo’s three-dimension cut.

than a retreat into concealment; it is a resistance to mastery, an insistence on an irreducible presence that resists full apprehension. As Glissant writes:

The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.⁶²⁷

Opacity does not withdraw from relation altogether. Instead, it invites a non-hierarchical and non-comparative engagement that neither consumes nor erases but acknowledges presence without requiring full comprehension. In this way, Orupabo's three-dimensional cuts unfold as a quiet resistance that compels a sustained, proximate gaze, not to yield certainty, but to unsettle it. From this perspective, the cut unfolds as an ethical intervention. What is at stake is not only the relation between fragments, but how the cut itself structures the possibility of relation, determining what may appear, how difference is encountered, and what remains withheld.

Here, Orupabo's formal strategies of repetition, doubling, and misalignment do not only disrupt representation; they produce a different mode of relation. This suspended encounter performs what I have described as *the caressing gaze*, a mode of approach that resists grasping and holds open a space where difference is encountered without resolution. Form becomes the site where ethics is performed, not exhausted by representation, but materially felt. Where Galton's composite portraiture sought to fix the subject through a visual generalization that "represented no man in particular", but a type that embodied the group's shared characteristics,⁶²⁸ Orupabo's formal strategies sustain ambiguity, complicating rather than clarifying and fixing subjectivity.

7.1.4 From composite image to an ethical cut

These works can be understood as resisting the colonial demand to yield a fully knowable subject. By foregrounding the constructed nature of the collective portrait, they also challenge the notion of identity as a stable, legible entity. In this way, the work performs an opacity that asserts presence without yielding to the archival drive to fix and classify—an imperative that Sekula identified as central to photography's role in constructing visual regimes of racialized control.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁷ Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

⁶²⁸ Daston and Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," 138; Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 47.

⁶²⁹ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."

As argued in Sections 6.4.6 and 6.4.7, Orupabo's practice departs from Grønstad's ethical cut by unsettling the representational conditions through which alterity becomes encounterable. Here, this divergence unfolds materially through fragmentation, layering and pinning, and the refusal of visual mastery. Grønstad frames the ethical cut as a formal opening to alterity arguing that "an ethics of form emerges precisely in the space where opacity materializes artistically."⁶³⁰ This can be read as presuming that difference appears within a representational structure, tethered to the formal logics of visibility and representation. Orupabo's three-dimensional cut can be seen to disrupt the stability of this tether.

In my reading, the space her cut constructs, belonging neither to the fragment itself nor the assembled collage, is one in which difference does not emerge *within* representational terms but instead strains, displaces or exceeds, their coherence. What emerges, then, is a presence that withholds recognition and eludes formal capture, thereby refusing assimilation into epistemic structures that govern how subjects are seen. Recast at the level of form, the interstitial spaces her cuts produce are not stable sites of representation but thresholds that resist incorporation into the visual field. In other words, the space she constructs refuses to settle into coherent representational form. Where Grønstad's ethical cut maintains a structured openness to alterity that still operates within a representational framework, Orupabo's cut can be understood as pushing against the limits of representation to unsettle the very conditions of relationality. It resists not only totalization but the very assumption that relation must be fully structured through representation. Her three-dimensional cut holds presence in suspension, producing an excess that resists conceptual containment.⁶³¹

The resistance to representational legibility that Orupabo's cut enacts can be read as what Asbjørn Grønstad calls an "ethical act," an aesthetic intervention that transforms "the fabric of the world" by opening it onto alterity.⁶³² While Grønstad locates the ethical cut *within* form as a site of encounter, Orupabo's cut can be seen as placing pressure on the representational conditions through which alterity may be encountered. This framing positions the cut as more than a material intervention. It becomes a mode through which differentiation, relation, and epistemic boundaries are enacted and contested, unsettling the structures that determine what can be known and encountered.

⁶³⁰ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 201.

⁶³¹ For a more detailed analysis of the cut as a material, epistemological, and ethical intervention. See Section 6.4.

⁶³² Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

Orupabo extends the cut into three-dimensional space, materializing it through layering, pinning, and the spatial articulation of fragmentation. Through these physical and sculptural strategies, Orupabo introduces fissures within the representational field. These interruptions resist visual mastery and actively shape how the encounter unfolds. Where Galton's composites masked their own assemblage in the production of a seamless image of a general type, the material ruptures in Orupabo's works open up a gap between image fragments that expose the constructed nature of the work. The space she constructs belongs neither to the photographic image nor to the assembled body of the collage. This gap, elusive and resistant to conceptual enclosure, safeguards the subject's opacity by sustaining an irreducible differentiation that resists the reductive frameworks of colonial and scientific classification. The cut, then, can be understood as a performative gesture, a material intervention that unsettles the visual power structures embedded in colonial image-making. As argued earlier, the artwork does not generate the ethical demand itself, but may call it forth, intensify it, or bring it into awareness. This mode of withholding invites not a deciphering, analytical gaze, but a way of seeing that is, as Lévinas writes, "not at all exhausted in arresting the movement and dynamism of knowledge".⁶³³ Instead, it compels a form of sensibility, an embodied responsiveness that suspends the drive for comprehension, what I have elsewhere described as the caressing gaze. In a caress, Lévinas writes,

what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there. The caress is the not coinciding proper to contact, a denuding never naked enough.⁶³⁴

In Orupabo's work, the cut does more than disturb visible coherence; it exposes a space of relation that neither yields to recognition nor conforms to structured relationality. It unfolds, in Lévinas' terms, "as the very gap between the approach and the approached," a space in which the viewer's claim to mastery is suspended.⁶³⁵ What emerges, then, is not a relation founded on comparison or comprehension, but of non-mastery, opacity, and suspended presence; inviting the viewer to remain with a presence that cannot be fully known.

⁶³³ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 63.

⁶³⁴ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 90.

⁶³⁵ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 90.

7.2 Gender as Wound: Approaching *Baby in Belly*

A heavily pregnant Black female figure is displayed horizontally, composed from layered and pinned photographic fragments that recall an articulated paper puppet. Measuring 125cm in length, the collage approaches human scale, lending it a bodily presence that is both intimate and unsettling (Figure 8). This formal ambiguity echoes the work's tension between clinical detachment and embodied vulnerability, between archival fragment and animated presence.

⁶³⁶ The collage's title —*Baby in Belly*—recalls the descriptive labels found on anatomical models or obstetric diagrams, evoking what Elisabeth Stephens identifies as a long history of attempts to visualize and access the maternal body.⁶³⁷ Presented with an open womb, the figure evokes the form of a nineteenth-century obstetric mannequin or the eighteenth-century anatomical Venus. These were figures historically designed to render female reproductive anatomy visible and controllable.

The history of these models is intertwined with the modern history of other human-like figures such as the waxen Venuses of the Renaissance. These models appeared at the dawn of Enlightenment, a period when the intersection of science and the arts blossomed and can be seen as a part of the Enlightenment project to impose a sense of order and control on the body (Figure 9). Anatomical models were not only tools for medical instruction, but popular attractions exhibited at fairs and museums.⁶³⁸ Their display coincided with the exhibition of

⁶³⁶ The pinkish hue of the open womb in *Baby in Belly* may initially recall Allison Saar's sculpture *Sapphire* (1985), in which an open chest cavity reveals a crimson interior illuminated by a glowing light bulb, surrounded by shards of glass and rocks. In her 2004 essay "Reclaiming Histories: Betye and Alison Saar, Feminism, and the Representation of Black Womanhood" Jessica Dallow suggests that Saar's work recalls Central African *minkisi* figurines — ritual "power objects" whose abdominal cavities were used to insert sacred substances into. These offerings were believed to have a performative function, such as aiding in healing, enhancing decisiveness, or hurting enemies. While the exposed interior and metal pins in *Baby in Belly* may gesture towards Saar's formal vocabulary, its orientation diverges: Rather than invoking spiritual ancestries or Afrocentric return, Orupabo's work confronts the clinical detachment of the scientific gaze imposed on the racialized female body.

⁶³⁷ Elisabeth Stephens, "VENUS IN THE ARCHIVE: Anatomical Waxworks of the Pregnant Body," *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 64 (2010): 133–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164641003762453>.

⁶³⁸ The Nineteenth century obstetric mannequin, which appears to be visually referenced in this work, functioned as a surrogate for the human body in two key ways. Most directly, the mannequin is substituted for the human body in the practice of obstetric techniques. But it also functioned as a proxy for the human body in a broader narrative of reproductive control. Constructed in what Edgar describes as "complete human form," with an open womb and moveable joints, the mannequin could be manipulated and placed "in any desirable position" by tightening or loosening "a single bolt" to simulate various birthing positions "at pleasure" (p 706). So naturalistic were these figures that they raised concern: the midwife and obstetrics writer Elizabeth Nihell warned that the mannequin's inability to speak or display pain could desensitize medical practitioners, fostering a mode of medical detachment

racialized individuals such as Sarah Baartman, whose life and posthumous display exemplify the entanglement of spectacle, science, and colonial ideology.⁶³⁹ As Stephens notes, anatomical models were not only representations of the body but were also linked to an emergent viewing practice; “a body seen through the lens of the newly anatomized gaze”.⁶⁴⁰ In this sense, anatomical figures participate in what Daston and Galison describe as a cultivated epistemic “ethos,” a habituated mode of seeing aligned with ideals of detachment and objectivity.⁶⁴¹

By rendering the female body as an anatomical object for display, *Baby in Belly* may be seen to evoke what Goldberg identifies as the abstraction foundational to racialized systems of control. Within this framework, the body is disarticulated from individual subjectivity and reconfigured as an object available for scrutiny, regulation, and exploitation.⁶⁴² But Orupabo is not merely *referencing* scientific image and object-making practices. She cuts, layers, and reassembles body parts sourced from archival photographs of predominantly racialized bodies from the colonial era. As such, *Baby in Belly* confronts the viewer with a visual language in which the act of cutting into photographic representations of skin carries historical and symbolic weight. The resulting material ruptures evoke the precision of a surgical intervention. Visually, these slits resemble incisions, marking both the surface of the photographic image and the symbolic threshold of the body. The accumulation of cuts and

with potentially violent and painful consequences for real women. As Nihell suggests, approaching the body as an object fosters a mode of detachment that precludes an encounter with the *lived experience* of the body; its vulnerability and its pain. See: Clifton Edgar, “The Manikin in Teaching of Practical Obstetrics,” *The New York Medical Journal* December 27 1890 (December 1890): 705–6, Elizabeth Nihell, *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery. Setting Forth Various Abuses Therein, Especially as to the Practise with Instruments: The Whole Serving to Put All Rational Inquirers in a Fair Way of Very Safely Forming Their Own Judgment Upon the Question; Which It Is Best to Employ, in Cases of Pregnancy and Lying-in, a Man-Midwife; Or, a Midwife* (A. Morley, 1709), 49–51.

⁶³⁹ The public display of these figures coincided with the practice of displaying racial others participating in the burgeoning visual culture in the late nineteenth century informed by scientific discourse that held that the “truth” of the body could be discovered and deciphered visually.

⁶⁴⁰ Stephens, “VENUS IN THE ARCHIVE,” 135.

⁶⁴¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, I am aware that Daston and Galison argue that the scientific gaze is trained to align with evolving standards of scientific representations.

⁶⁴² Goldberg, “RACIST CULTURE,” 50 Goldberg writes: “The neutrality and objectifying distantiation of the rational scientist created the theoretical space for a view to develop of subjectless bodies. Once objectified, these bodies could be analyzed, categorized, classified, and ordered with the cold gaze of scientific distance. So the principle of gradation was employed to ground racial classification. Classification could then claim to provide an objective ordering.”

fissures constructs a maternal body laid open, suspended in tension between image and flesh, between what is made visible and the embodied act of seeing.⁶⁴³

The material wounds Orupabo constructs are produced through what I have previously described as the three-dimensional cut. This gesture strains the limits representation: it intervenes materially, cutting into the image as surface, skin, and sign. The wound, then, is not only re-presented; it is materially enacted through the cut. The cut does more than open the surface of the image; it may be understood as a performative, aesthetic, and ethical gesture that unsettles representational coherence. Rather than yielding the transparency and legibility promised by scientific imagery, the cut tears the image open, creating a zone of instability, and excess, where the racialized and gendered body cannot be fully grasped.

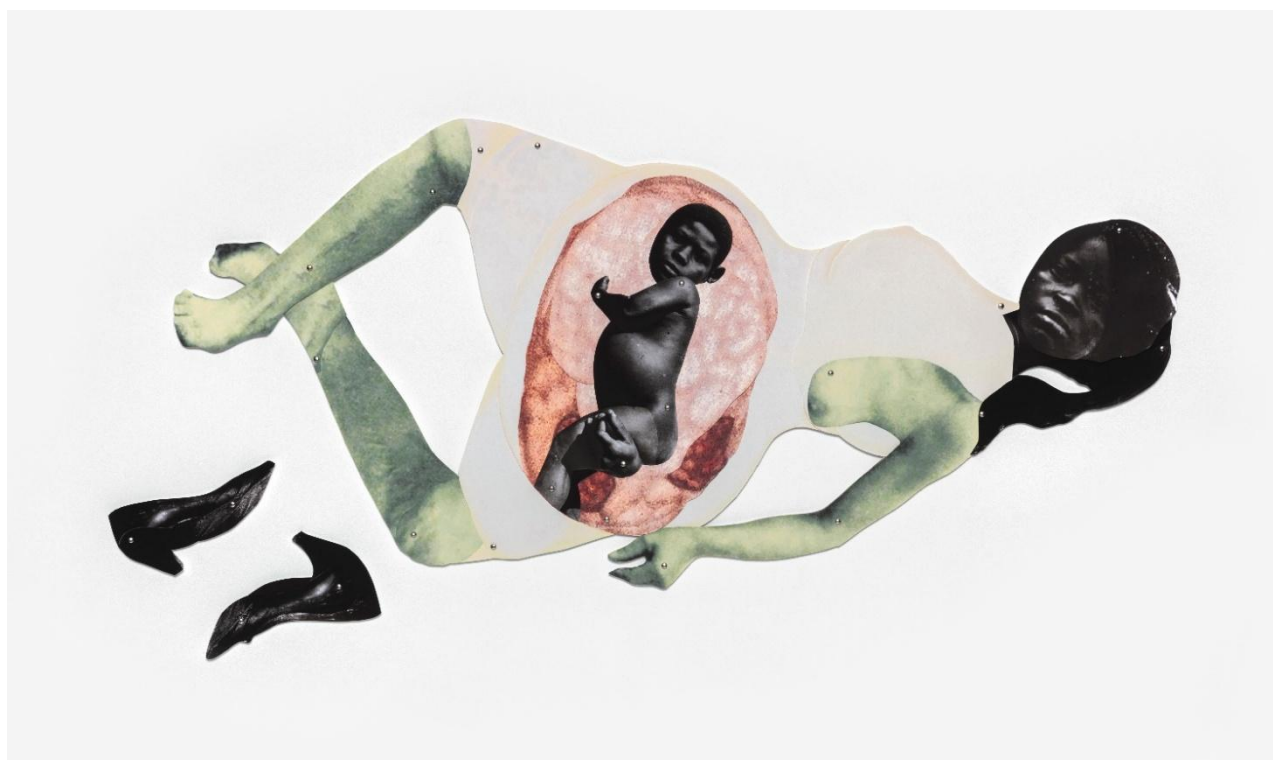


Figure 8. Frida Orupabo, *Baby in Belly*, 2020. Collage with paper pins, 60 x 122 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town / Amsterdam.

⁶⁴³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 140 Didi-Huberman writes: “He who chooses only to know will have gained, of course, the unity of the synthesis and the self-evidence of simple reason; but he will lose the real of the object, in the symbolic closure of the discourse that reinvents the object in its own image, or rather in its own representation. By contrast, he who desires to see, or rather to look, will lose the unity of an enclosed world to find himself in the uncomfortable opening of a universe henceforth suspended, subject to all the winds of meaning; it is here that synthesis will become fragile to the point of collapse; and that the object of sight, eventually touched by a bit of the real, I will dismantle the subject of knowledge, dooming simple reason to something like a rend.”

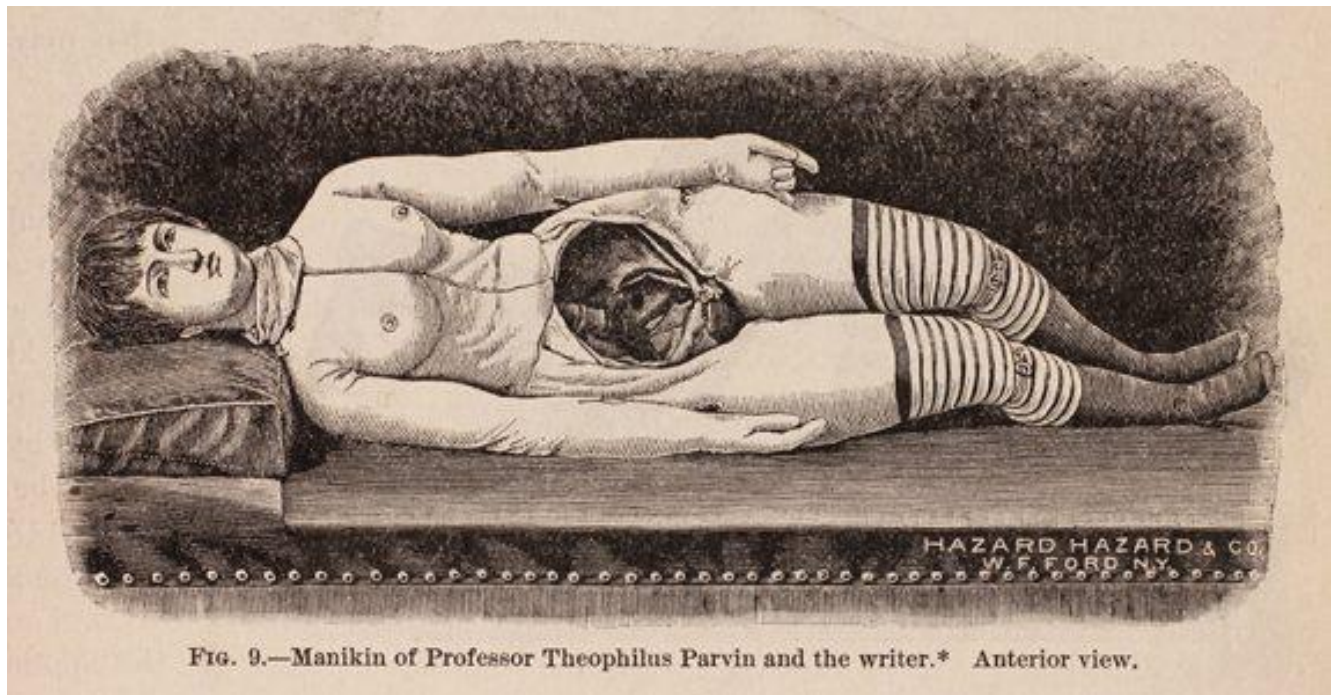


Figure 9. Illustration of the Parvin–Edgar obstetric manikin. From the article: “The Manikin in Teaching of Practical Obstetrics,” *The New York Medical Journal* December 27, 1890, 705–6.

7.2.1 The double wound

The fenestrated womb, both the literal and symbolic center of the collage, organizes the composition of the work around an open wound in the maternal body. The abdominal wall appears to have been stripped away, exposing in a fleshy pink hue, the supple, undulating contours of a disproportionately large womb containing a fetus. This interior is constructed through the layering and pinning of multiple fragments so that distinct surfaces meet, overlap, and break against one another, producing subtle sculptural ruptures in the collage. The viewer is thus confronted not only with the depiction of a wound but with material fissures that are constructed through the layered assembly of fragments.⁶⁴⁴ In other words, Orupabo does not simply represent a wound, she inflicts it by literally cutting and layering representations of flesh-like matter in a way that opens physical ruptures within the work

⁶⁴⁴ The fleshy interior of the womb appears to be composed from layered fragments that may be photographic representations of a painted surface or an edited photographic image. This ambiguity does not weaken the wound's tactile or representational charge, but rather complicates the boundary between skin, image, and flesh; intensifying the instability between surface and depth that the collage stages.

itself. The three-dimensional cut thus enacts what might be described as a *double wound*: one that opens the represented body, and one that disrupts the image as coherent visual form. It draws attention to the fractured surface as both symbolic and wounded, both legible and undone. Through this intervention, Orupabo materializes a spatial, material, and symbolic interstice that unsettles both meaning and representational coherence.

This intertwining and collapse of a rendered wound and its physical enactment resonates with Didi-Huberman's concept of the *pan*, that he develops through, among others, a reading of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*. In *Baby in Belly*, the central pool of red functions as what may be described as a recognition-anchor through which the surrounding gashes and protrusions register as lacerations, even as they, in Didi-Huberman's terms, depart from representation into material excess. In Didi-Huberman's reading of *The Lacemaker*, a claim is that Vermeer first paints a mimetically rendered thread, and then, right beside it, a second thread that unravels into pure materiality; paint no longer represents, but asserts its own materiality, interrupting the painting's own representational system.⁶⁴⁵

This juxtaposition between representation and painterly event, finds its counterpart in *Baby in Belly*, where Orupabo renders a visible wound while also creating material breaches within the depiction itself. As in the *pan*, the tactile residue of cutting produces a disruption of surface and form that resists assimilation, generating a visibility that is partial, illegible, and affectively charged.⁶⁴⁶ As Didi-Huberman writes, the *pan* is "not an articulated sign; it is not legible as such. It just offers itself: a pure 'appearance 'of something.' " What appears, he continues, is "the quality of the figurable [...] illegible, presented."⁶⁴⁷ In *Baby in Belly*, the recognition-anchor (the pool of red) enables the surrounding protrusions and gashes to register as wounds, even as they seem to exceed representation.

Rather than emerging through the visual clash of incongruent image content, as discussed in relation to the juxtapositional cut in Sections 6.4.4 and 6.4.5, the affective potency here arises from the multiple protrusions and gashes that infect the depiction of the wound as something bodily, thing-like, and materially wounded. In this moment, the wound seems to surge toward the viewer, the maternal body's interior opened and pressed outward in an

⁶⁴⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 254–56. See also my discussion Didi-Huberman's concept of the *pan* in Section 6.4.8.

⁶⁴⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 256, 270–71.

⁶⁴⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 17–18.

articulation that is once intimate and violent. The layered and pinned flesh-colored fragments lift and protrude outwards, pushing the figure of the baby towards the viewer and constructing literal gashes in the collage's skin. Each cut multiplying the others' force. This material and spatial disturbance introduces an unsettling element where vision falters, and something labile and ungraspable insists as a presence that resists grasp.

While Didi-Huberman's concept of the *pan* designates a material disruption immanent to the work, I now turn to his concept of the *rend* to unfold the perceptual, affective, and epistemological consequences of the *pan* that arise in the encounter between work and beholder. The *rend* marks a tear in the "fabric of representation" as it is experienced, interrupting visual mastery and dislocating perception from symbolic closure.⁶⁴⁸ In Didi-Huberman's terms, this is *presentation* as it "shows through" *representation*. Such presentation is inseparable from the formless —what Didi-Huberman calls "*materia informis*": an affective, unstable force that resists both figuration and epistemic capture.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143–44.

⁶⁴⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143, 170. Didi-Huberman writes: "There is here a kind of anadyomene movement, a movement whereby something that has plunged into the water momentarily reemerges, is born before quickly plunging in again: it is the *materia informis* when it shows through† form, it is the presentation when it shows through representation, it is opacity when it shows through transparency, it is the visual when it shows through the visible."



Figure 10: Detail of *Baby in Belly*. Frida Orupabo, *Baby in Belly*, 2020. Collage with paper pins, 60 x 122 cm.

7.2.2 Skin-as-image / Skin-as-flesh

The artist's selective use of color draws the viewer's attention to the womb as a site of both violence and potential life (Figure 10 and 11). Its raw, fleshy color evokes a visceral immediacy, heightened by contrast with the greenish tint of the maternal body, a rare departure from the artist's otherwise predominantly monochrome palette.⁶⁵⁰ Historically, Blackness has been marked and controlled through visual regimes that fixate on the surface of the skin as a site of racial difference.⁶⁵¹ By lifting the fragments into relief, the cut reconfigures racialized skin as a vulnerable surface that withholds full legibility. In this way, the wounds Orupabo creates can be seen to stage this history while refusing to resolve it into transparency or legibility.

Through the three-dimensional cut, Orupabo produces material fissures and protrusions that are at once visual, spatial, and materially felt and activates the collage as simultaneously bodily and thing-like. This elevation of fragments endows the collage with a sculptural presence that evokes the fleshy dimensionality of a body rather than the inert flatness of the photographic paper. Hovering uneasily on the threshold between object and flesh, *Baby in Belly* registers a tension inscribed in the body-made-object that the work visually references.⁶⁵²

This wavering between formal cohesion and perceptual collapse infuses the work with an affective strain that resists conceptual resolution, draws the viewer into a state of visual and bodily vulnerability. Situated precisely on the interstice of the phenomenological and semiological field, the three-dimensional opening of the represented wound destabilizes

⁶⁵⁰ In an interview with Elvira Dyangani Ose, Orupabo commented on her use of color: "light pink, light green – are associated with [pregnancy and labor]... different fluids coming from the body." See Frida Orupabo, *Hours After*, interview by Elvira Dyangani Ose, Online conversation published by Stevenson gallery in the exhibition catalogue, October 9, 2020, 12, <https://www.stevenson.info/sites/default/files/FOconversation%20.pdf>.

⁶⁵¹ See Chapter 3, for a discussion of the racialized body as legible surface in relation to visual regimes and representational control.

⁶⁵² I use the term flesh in this analysis to refer to the threshold between body and object, a site of visual and material vulnerability, rather than in the sense employed by Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe an American grammar book". However, the visual vocabulary of the obstetric mannequin could also be read as a critique of the historical effacement of Black subjectivity by underscoring the distinction between "body" and "flesh," which Spillers conceptualizes as metaphors for captive and liberal subject positions. For Spillers, flesh marks a profound state of vulnerability — a raw and unprotected surface where the violence of subjugation inscribes itself. This vulnerability, obscured by what she terms as "cultural seeing by color," reduces the racialized other to an object, stripping away their humanity and identity. See also: Ferreira da Silva, "Sending Language into Battle," 22.

visual meaning without converting this unsettlement into stable interpretation. Instead, it opens a space where difference remains unresolved and the relation between viewer and work unsettled, engaging the viewer instead on an affective, embodied level.⁶⁵³ The cut, then, unfolds as both physical and symbolic, gesturing toward the vulnerability of the pinkish flesh it exposes, without resolving into fixed meaning. In this gesture, *skin-as-image*, and *skin-as-flesh* fold into one another, creating a double wound that marks both the re-presented body within the photograph and the photograph as object. Here, visual surface and bodily presence momentarily collapse, destabilizing the distinction between image and flesh. The three-dimensional cut materializes a site where racialized skin resists flattening into representation, pressing instead toward an affective, unstable encounter. This collapse draws the viewer into an encounter with the racialized and gendered body, not as a legible surface, but as a wounded presence. In this way, Orupabo's cut unfolds as more than an aesthetic gesture; it reconfigures the photographic surface into a site of vulnerability and resistance, where the collapse of image and flesh invites us to rethink the terms by which the racialized and gendered body is made visible.

7.2.3 The returned gaze

Viewed from above, the Black maternal body is rendered inert and exposed through the distanced, controlling perspective that typifies the scientific gaze. Yet this orifice does not grant what Rosalind Petchesky describes as a “panoptic of the womb.”⁶⁵⁴ Rather than offering unimpeded access to the maternal interior, the viewer's attempt to scrutinize the womb is met by a dual interruption: what reads as the questioning gaze of a fetus pinned in place and the steady outward gaze of the mother. Formally, this refusal is staged by lifted and layered fragments that push the fetus forward, giving it a tentative, almost intrusive presence. Instead of resting quietly within the body's interior, the fetus appears to press toward the viewer, subtly unsettling the boundary between image and space. Visible split pins hold the body in

⁶⁵³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 264 Didi-Huberman frames the “rend” as an affective and semiological disturbance emerging between artwork and beholder. For an in-depth discussion of Orupabo's three-dimension cut in relation to Didi-Huberman's rend see Section 6.4.2 and 6.4.3.

⁶⁵⁴ Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 277, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177802>.

place, their provisional fastening foregrounding the scene's constructed, unstable nature and amplifying its sense of rupture.

This is no passive, unaware fetus familiar from anatomic displays. In stark contrast to the mother's marked horizontal display, the fetus is presented vertically, with an erect posture and adult-like head, that suggests, rather than confirms, a sense of agency. This gaze, drawn from a historic photograph, becomes oppositional within the context of the collage; it obstructs the impulse to appropriate and objectify, and can be seen to resist the dehumanizing grip of the scientific gaze. The works' fragmentary energy emerges from this confrontation. The cool and objectifying aura of the mannequin-like body is punctuated by the questioning gaze of the fetus —a gaze echoed by the mother. These gazes do not so much compete as reinforce one another, pressing against the erasure of subjectivity from within the fragmented image and subtly reorienting the position of the viewer.

Orupabo has emphasized that her work aims to prompt viewers to reflect on the way they look. As Orupabo puts it: "I want people to question their own gaze, what it is they see and why; to make them more aware about themselves than the work."⁶⁵⁵ This intent shapes her selection process: "When choosing images I am looking for resistance or some type of tension, especially in the way a subject sees, or stares."⁶⁵⁶ As she noted in an early interview, "The focus is always on creating a space that confronts and works against racist and sexist discourses, also within my own self."⁶⁵⁷ This dual emphasis —on external systems and internalized structures of domination— opens the collage as more than a visual rupture: It unfolds as an ethical encounter that implicates both the viewer and artist in a shared, unsettled space of responsibility. Emerging from the red pool at the body's central hollow, the fetal gaze comes to confront the viewer, implicating them, and rendering them vulnerable. The act of looking is thus transformed into an encounter where the viewer is also *seen* through the work's formal staging of the gaze. The gaze denies the viewer the pleasure of self-forgetting: we become aware of ourselves as seeing. This structural interplay of gazes destabilizes the traditional subject-object hierarchy; opening the possibility of a gaze that is relational rather than dominating. In this suspended space, an opening toward an ethical gaze, what I elsewhere describe as a caressing gaze, begins to emerge. The viewer is no longer master of

⁶⁵⁵ Orupabo, "Hours After," 9.

⁶⁵⁶ Orupabo, "Hours After," 7.

⁶⁵⁷ Tchokokam, "A conversation with Frida Orupabo."

the artwork but is drawn into a relational field that does not yield a panoptic view, but a gestational space of proximity and vulnerability.

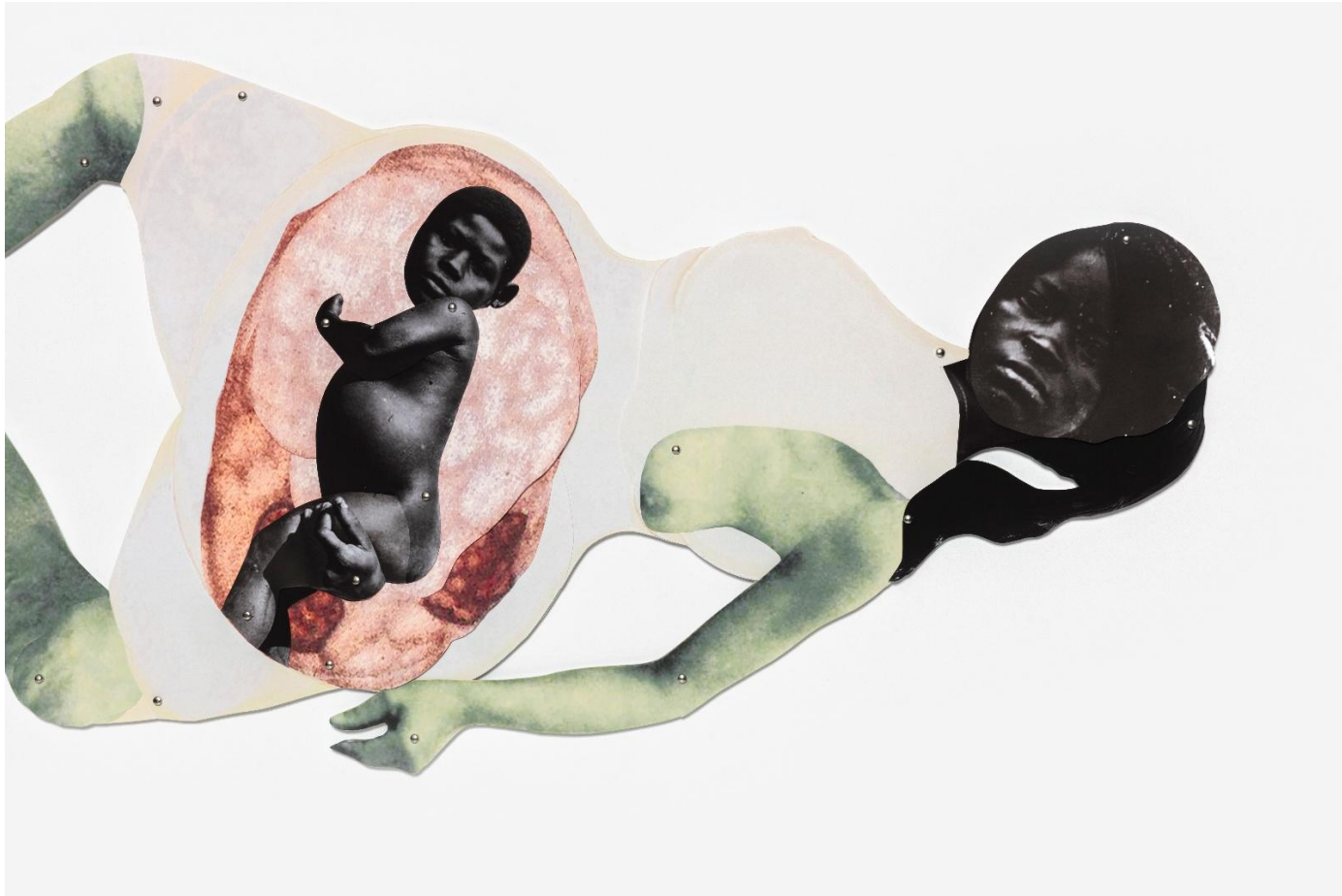


Figure 11: Detail of *Baby in Belly*.

Frida Orupabo, *Baby in Belly*, 2020. Collage with paper pins, 60 x 122 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town / Amsterdam.

7.2.4 Beyond Representational Form: Unravelling the Visual Grammar of Scientific Imaging

The collage's stark exposure of interior anatomy draws upon the visual language of modern scientific image-making techniques that optically dissect and penetrate the body. Within *Baby in Belly* this grammar is transposed onto the Black maternal figure, echoing a visual regime that renders the pregnant body transparent to access the fetus. As Sara Rodriguez observes, these imaging techniques frequently frame the fetus as a separate, fully formed subject, while

the mother is reduced,⁶⁵⁸ in Petchesky's terms, to a mere "maternal environment".⁶⁵⁹ This visual rhetoric not only effaces the lived, embodied experience of childbearing but also risks reinforcing power structures that have historically pathologized and regulated reproductive bodies.⁶⁶⁰ Such practices are particularly fraught when mapped onto racialized bodies where the history of reproductive control is deeply entangled with racialized violence.

At first glance, Orupabo's use of visual fragmentation might appear to reproduce this clinical detachment, severing the viewer's empathetic relation to the body's suffering in ways that echo the epistemic ethos of objectivity cultivated by scientific image-making, as described by scholars such as Cartwright, Daston, and Galison.⁶⁶¹ Yet *Baby in Belly* resists this foreclosure. It invokes the scientific gaze only to fracture it. What first appears as a site of transparency becomes, instead, a site of visual and aesthetic opacity. The maternal body is open but not made available; the visual promise of transparency is interrupted and denied.

This resistance to epistemic mastery is not only representational but grounded in form. The cultural history of obstetric surveillance —marked by the effacement of maternal agency and the regulation of reproduction —frames how the work's formal structure can be read.

Through the three-dimensional cut, the illusion of a transparent, fully knowable, transparent reproductive body is unsettled. The body, no longer inert or legible, insists on its opacity. By intervening in the photograph's surface, Orupabo constructs material wounds that destabilize

⁶⁵⁸ Sara Rodrigues, "A Woman's 'Right to Know'? Forced Ultrasound Measures as an Intervention of Biopower," *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 7, no. 1 (2014): 60, <https://doi.org/10.2979/intjfemappbio.7.1.51>.

⁶⁵⁹ Petchesky, "Fetal Images," 277.

⁶⁶⁰ As Dorothy Roberts describes the social and legal policies in the United States regulated the reproductive choices of enslaved Black females: "Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception. This feature of slavery made control of reproduction a central aspect of white's subjugation of African people in America. It marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will. For slave women, procreation had little to do with liberty. To the contrary, Black women's childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes about the autobiography of a slave named Harriet Jacobs, it "charts in vivid detail precisely how the shape of her life and the choices she makes are defined by her reduction to a sexual object, an object to be raped, bred, or abused." Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), 46.

⁶⁶¹ Cartwright, *Screening the Body*, 126; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.

representational coherence —exposing skin as a locus of racialized and gendered vulnerability while insisting on a wounded, uncontainable subjectivity.

The gaze of the fetus, echoed and reinforced by the mother's gaze, confronts the viewer, as a subjectivity that sees rather than an object for study. This encounter opens a relational space—a gestational moment—that opens toward an ethical relation rather than a totalizing encounter. The peephole into the interior withholds the clinical access it evokes. Rather, it interrupts that promise, transforming what may initially appear to be a site of decipherability into one of opacity. In Orupabo's collage, the visual grammar of scientific image-making is both cited and unraveled: the maternal body is opened yet remains unsundered.

Here, the act of cutting introduces an epistemological and affective rupture. The three-dimensional cut renders the body of the collage at once sculptural, tactile, and vulnerable, skin unfolds as both image and wound, and seeing is no longer an act of mastery. This refusal of visual containment finds its counterpart in the gaze that emerges from within the open womb. The gaze returned from within the wound gestures toward a different way of seeing: one that is attuned to opacity, interruption, and the limits of knowledge. In this suspended encounter, vision becomes proximity rather than possession, and the work invites us not to master the wound but to linger with it, staying with the discomfort it may provoke.

7.3 The Cut as Spatial and Temporal Force: Towards an Ethical Encounter

The emphasis on the cut as a material and spatial intervention also extends beyond Orupabo's hinged collages, as she expands this sculptural composition into her installations, where fragmentation and opacity take on an overtly spatial form.⁶⁶² Here, the cut no longer operates solely within the bounded field of the image, but unfolds across space and duration, implicating the viewer's movement and orientation. The three-dimensional cut is thus extended into a spatial configuration that destabilizes coherence not only visually, but bodily, and temporally.

Of course everything is real (2024) is a large-scale installation composed of fragmented female facial features appropriated from archival photographs. These images are printed on anodized aluminum, mounted on stainless steel poles at varying heights, and displayed within a darkened exhibition space. Illuminated by a projected light source, the features appear to hover in space. Initially, they create the illusion of a singular plane, but as the viewer moves through the installation, this perception shifts — the features fractured across multiple spatial planes.⁶⁶³ Through this radical spatial fragmentation, Orupabo extends the cut beyond the image itself, generating a tension between presence and dissolution that unsettles the viewer's bodily orientation and unfolds across space and time. Yet in *Of course everything is real*, the cut structures an ongoing instability in which the fragment is neither fixed nor stable but held in continual movement between disintegration and becoming. Here, opacity is not a singular

⁶⁶² On the materiality and spatial dimensions of the cut, see Chapter 6 where I describe how Orupabo's three-dimensional practice reconfigures the cut as a sculptural and affective rupture —one that opens a site of instability and ethical tension rather than resolving into visual coherence.

⁶⁶³ This analysis is based on the work's presentation at Frida Orupabo's exhibition "On Lies, Secrets, and Silence" at Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm, Sweden in 2024. The exhibition title, borrowed from Adrienne Rich's prose collection, invokes a feminist reflection on the politics of speech, silence(ing), and the reclamation of suppressed expression —a theme that resonates strongly with Orupabo's practice. A later presentation of the work, at Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo, took place in a starkly white and uniformly lit exhibition space. These different presentation forms produced a markedly different sensory and perceptual experience. Where the exit at the end of the room in Stockholm prompted the viewer to walk into and through the installation, the exhibition space at Astrup Fearnley had no such exit, leading viewers to take the work in from a distance and therefore seeing it as a whole. Apart from the changed surroundings, the mouth was turned upside down. This aspect will be discussed in Section 7.5.

disruption but an experience that unfolds through movement — where the female face remains both present and in process of disappearance, continually eluding capture.



Figure 12: Frida Orupabo, *Of course everything is real*, installation view *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Bonniers Konsthall, 2024. Photo: Bonniers Konsthall, Jean-Baptiste Béranger.



Figure 13: Frida Orupabo, *Of course everything is real*, installation view *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Bonniers Konsthall, 2024. Photo: Bonniers Konsthall, Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

7.3.1 The Cut as Spatial and Temporal Disorientation

To step into *Of course everything is real* is to step inside the cut itself — a spatial, temporal, and phenomenological force that unfolds continuously, structuring fragmentation and drawing the viewer into its ongoing disintegration and becoming. Rather than being instantly perceivable, the cut is experienced in motion, revealing itself gradually. On entering the room, a large slyly grimacing mouth — positioned closest to the entrance — dominates the field of vision before slipping out of sight as the viewer moves through the installation. Then the nose follows, then the eyes —until the entire face dissolves.⁶⁶⁴ In this way, *Of course everything is real* stages a tension between hypervisibility and disappearance as the monumental, illuminated face gradually gives way, disintegrating into near-invisibility. This dual movement of dissolution and emergence aligns with what Fred Moten describes as “the ongoing destruction of the ongoing production” — a continual interplay of disappearance and reappearance that refuses to be fixed, absorbed, or fully contained.⁶⁶⁵ As the viewer moves through the installation, the fragmented face never settles into a fixed form or a fully knowable subject. Instead, the experience unfolds through movement and shifting spatial depth. Rather than a stable representation contained within visibility, the subject gradually *slips away*, dissolving into movement. The face, then, is both present and in the process of disappearance, continually eluding capture —exhibiting itself in the sensible world even as it rends it. The radicalized three-dimensional cut, then, structures an ongoing spatial and temporal instability through which the face remains beyond full grasp, refusing to cohere into fixed form. The installation stages an affective and perceptual unmooring where the spectator’s presumed control over the spectacle — a foundational premise of the dualistic structure of spectatorship — begins to unravel. In *Of course everything is real* the act of looking produces an encounter that resists containment visual field of representation.

This refusal unsettles the very logic of the colonial gaze, which historically sought to stabilize racialized subjects into fixed, knowable forms, enforcing a hierarchical visual order that rendered them available to scrutiny and control. Orupabo’s work resists this visual regime by

⁶⁶⁴ In the exhibition catalog “On lies, secrets and silence”, *Of course everything is real* (2024) is presented in two versions — one as displayed at Bonniers Konsthall and another where the mouth is turned upside down. The inversion significantly alters the affective resonance of the face, unsettling its expression and further complicating the viewers encounter with the work. This transformation underscores how Orupabo’s cut does not function as a singular of finite rupture but as an ongoing, contingent process. By subtly shifting the configuration of the face, Orupabo resists stabilization, reinforcing her refusal of fixity. This aspect of the cut is discussed in more detail in section 7.5 –7.5.2

⁶⁶⁵ Moten, *In The Break*, 188.

producing an opacity that is not a retreat into obscurity *but a continuous becoming* that evades the racialized regimes of visibility that seek to define and fix Blackness.

7.3.2 The cut and the Cry

Orupabo's radicalized three-dimensional cut, however, is not only seen — it is *felt*, registered through the viewer's spatial (dis)orientation and perceptual unmooring. As the viewer moves through the installation their orientation becomes increasingly unsettled. The darkened walls and floor blend into one another, dissolving any clear sense of spatial boundaries and eliminating familiar perceptual markers. This effect is intensified by the projected light on the suspended fragmented facial features that seem to disintegrate as the viewer moves through the successive planes of the installation. In this way, the fragmented features serve both as focal points and sensory distortions; creating the conditions for a continuously unfolding perceptual disruption while shaping an experience that cannot be fully anticipated nor contained. Taken together, these effects suggest that Orupabo's cut performs a fugitivity that extends beyond disappearance into a lingering, *reverberating excess*, unsettling the primacy of vision. Rather than yielding to full transparency, the cut insists on an opacity that unsettles the primacy of the ocular-centric gaze, refusing to be fully contained within the realm of sight.⁶⁶⁶ As discussed in Section 6.5, Fred Moten's theorization of the cry describes a phonic and affective resonance that exceeds the visual field, disrupting visual and analytical frameworks. His account offers a way of approaching this dynamic as an ongoing disruption of representation:

It is the ongoing destruction of the ongoing production of (a) (black) performance, which is what I am, which is what you are or could be if you can listen while you look. If he seems to keep disappearing as you look at him it's because you look away, which is what makes possible and impossible representation, reproduction, dream. And there is a sound that is seemingly not there in this performance that this performance is about; but not just a sound since we are also concerned with what that sound would invoke—immortal or utopian longings, though not the utopianism of a past made present, not the recovery of a loss, and not just a negation of the present either, in the form of an ongoing displacement of the concrete. Rather, here is an abundance—in abundance—of the present, an abundance of affirmation in abundance of the negative, in abundance of disappearance.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁶ See my discussion of Moten's cry in relation to Orupabo's installation *Of Course Everything is Real* in Section 7.3.2

⁶⁶⁷ Moten, *In The Break*, 188.

Moten's theorization of the *unheard* sound of the image gestures toward how Orupabo's cut exceeds representation and can be understood as preceding perception. For Moten, what emerges in the cry is a force that slips between presence and absence without settling into either. In Moten's terms, this movement can be understood as an ongoing displacement of the concrete. Within the frame of opacity, it unfolds as a presence that resists full visibility.

The three-dimensional cut, as it unfolds in this overtly spatial configuration, unsettles the viewer as they move through its fragmented planes, an experience that resonates with Moten's notion of the cry as "an abundance," an excessive ongoing rupture.⁶⁶⁸ In this way, the cut does not negate meaning altogether but holds rupture open as bodily resonance — unsettling the stability of looking.⁶⁶⁹ This resonance does not resolve into communicability; it remains a disturbance that implicates the body without yielding to comprehension. In this way, *Of course everything is real* resists being merely "read;" it asserts itself as an unstable presence that withdraws from fixed meaning while unfolding as a destabilization in the body of the beholder, drawing the viewer into a corporeal relation that extends beyond passive and detached observation. Dash's account of opacity as an embodied force (Section 4.2 and 4.5) helps us unfold how this destabilization can be understood as a disturbance of the condition of perception itself. Building on this, Dash's emphasis on sensuous grip and affective entanglement provides a framework for thinking through how perception is preceded by the body's sensuous engagement with the work. Caught in the affective field of the Other, the mind, as Dash notes, "is not free to see and act but constantly in the grip of sensations emitted from the body."⁶⁷⁰ Drawn into the installation, vision no longer operates primarily through detachment but enters toward a mode of sensuous proximity, consistent with the non-mastering orientation I describe as the caressing gaze, where the body becomes the threshold through which aesthetic force is felt. The cut thus extends beyond aesthetic encounter alone, operating as an affective force that disorients the viewer in motion as they move through the installation, mirroring the instability of the fragmented image itself. Approached through the logic of Moten's cry, this destabilization takes on a phonic and resonant force that the work *opens onto* but, in Moten's sense, "cannot secure."⁶⁷¹ In this way, the work engages more than the eye; it implicates the viewer in a profoundly disorienting, vestibular experience that destabilizes the ontological conditions of looking, namely the assumption that vision is stable,

⁶⁶⁸ Moten, *In The Break*, 188.

⁶⁶⁹ Moten, *In The Break*, 186, 188. See my discussion of Fred Moten's cry in Section 6.5.

⁶⁷⁰ Dash, "Writing the Body," 610.

⁶⁷¹ Moten, *In The Break*, 186.

reliable, and primary. This assumption, as discussed in Chapter 3, underpinned the colonial gaze's reading of the racialized body as reducible to surface, an assumption inscribed in the very images Orupabo fragments and reconfigures in her installation.⁶⁷² In this way, what may be thought of, provisionally, as Orupabo's *cut-as-cry* is not confined to the visual but enacted spatially and phenomenologically.

7.3.3 Residual traces — The presence of absence

Just as the eyes of the installation vanish from sight, an almost imperceptible trace remains — a faint, aura-like light projected on the back wall; outlining the contours of the now-absent facial features (Figure 14). This spectral residue wavers at the threshold of visibility and obscurity, of both emergence and withdrawal. Confronted with these liminal traces of a face, both present and absent, it is tempting to, at this point, recall philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot words in *The Birth of Art* where he describes “the furtive, fearful, indelible trace” that marks an encounter that cannot be possessed.⁶⁷³ Blanchot's notion of the trace suggests that presence is not only accompanied by the threat of disappearance, it is defined by it. The trace does not merely signify absence; *it makes absence present*. For Blanchot, disappearance is not an endpoint but an animating force, what brings presence into being. Seen this way, absence is not simply the dissolution of presence but its fundamental condition.

This weaving together of presence and absence does not merely resonate with Moten's elaborations on Black art, it is transformed by them. If, for Blanchot, disappearance is an ontological condition — a structuring force that brings presence into being — then, crucially, for Moten, disappearance is more than a metaphysical inevitability, it is a historically imposed negation that Black art refuses through an uncontainable aesthetic and political insistence. This resistance functions as what Moten calls the “disappearance of the disappearance”, an aesthetic and political undoing of Black suffering's historical erasure. Yet, fugitivity is not only about resisting erasure; it is also about the refusal to be fixed within representation. Blackness, subjected to capture through racial surveillance, the colonial archive,

⁶⁷² For this exhibition, Orupabo describes using material from vintage porn films in addition to images from the colonial archive. While the provenance of the specific image here is uncertain, both the colonial and pornographic visual regimes reduce the body to surface, operating through a paradox of hyper-visibility and erasure.

⁶⁷³ Maurice Blanchot, “The Birth of Art,” in *Friendship*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1997), 11, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503620445>.

and the photographic image, resists legibility through an insistence — “an abundance” — that exceeds the frame.⁶⁷⁴

In *Of course everything is real* the cut sustains an unstable visibility — a presence that, in Blanchot’s sense, is neither fully here nor entirely absent. The spectral traces render presence only fleetingly perceptible, yet they do not dissolve completely. Instead, they persist as a residual presence, hovering at the threshold of perception, withdrawn even as they remain. These transient traces can be approached as what Blanchot describes as “apparitions” — unstable events “made up of certainty and instability, scintillating at the edges of appearances.”⁶⁷⁵ Blanchot’s apparitions help open up perspectives on the spectral instability of presence in *Of course everything is real* — how the traces waver between emergence and withdrawal, never fully appearing nor disappearing. Yet, while Blanchot’s apparition gestures toward perceptual liminality and uncertainty, it does not account for how presence, in this work, refuses disappearance as an historical and political act. Apparitions destabilize perception, but fugitivity resists disappearance as a completed act.

Moten’s notion of fugitivity *within* opacity complicates this reading. If the apparition marks an unsettled visibility, fugitivity does more than extend this instability; it performs an active refusal of capture. Fugitivity is not purely a visual phenomenon, it also operates through registers such as the *cry* — the sonic, albeit unheard, force that exceeds representation. In this sense, it insists on presence in excess, moving beyond perceptual instability into a bodily resonance that refuses to be contained within structured relationality.

⁶⁷⁴ Moten, *In The Break*, 188.

⁶⁷⁵ Blanchot, “The Birth of Art,” 7.



Figure 14: Frida Orupabo, *Of course everything is real*, installation view *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Bonniers Konsthall, 2024. Note the spectral traces on the back wall. After the viewer moves beyond the eyes these spectral traces remain on the wall. Photo: Ingvild K. Melby

7.3.4 Partial eclipse: The Viewer's Presence in the Cut

This tension between withdrawal and fugitivity is further complicated by the shifting role of the viewer. As the viewer reaches the end of the installation, their body partially eclipses and is caught up in the lingering traces of the fragmented face, momentarily entangling them in a presence that is at once residual yet insistent.⁶⁷⁶ In this moment, the viewer's body moves through fragments drawn from the photographic archive, producing an encounter in which the present body intersects with the projected archival images of the past. If, as I have suggested, to step into *Of course everything is real* is to step into the cut-as-cry, then the entanglement of the viewer's body with the residual light traces on the back wall, enacts this ongoing rupture. This encounter does not dissolve the boundaries between self and the Other; rather, it opens a relational space where opacity unfolds as a fugitivity. This fugitive encounter resists assimilation into structured relationality while preserving difference as irreducible. As discussed in Section 4.4, opacity is not a refusal of relation, it invites a mode of co-existence grounded in non-mastery. Yet, in this work, fugitivity operates through opacity as a movement that evades containment, resisting stabilization into presence or absence, moment or duration. As Britton notes in her reading of Glissant, opacity is not reducible to the evasion of "the master's gaze" rather, it opens a space for non-hierarchical engagement.⁶⁷⁷

This distinction helps us approach the spatial dynamics of the installation, where the viewer is implicated in the cut itself. As the viewer's body partially eclipses the fragmented face, they are drawn into a state of proximity and implication — yet this relationality is structured by fugitivity rather than transparency. The work resists coherence, refusing both assimilation into structured meaning and the stability of visibility. Rather than forming a comparative relation, the entanglement of the viewer's body foregrounds ambiguity, refusing to settle into binary oppositions. In this way, Opacity, in this work, emerges as a fugitive movement — an

⁶⁷⁶ A related dynamic can be observed in the Black Audio Film Collective's early multimedia performance discussed in Section 3.3, where performers stood between the projection surface and the lighting rig causing their bodies to intersect with the projected archival images. While the BAFC's staging introduced bodily interruption within the projected visual field, Orupabo's installation (as it was presented at Bonniers Kunsthall), implicates the viewer directly within the fragmented image-space itself, so that the spectator becomes the mode of point of interruption.

⁶⁷⁷ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 23.

excessive presence that opens a new relational dynamic, resonating with the cry in its refusal to settle into presence or absence.

7.3.5 Ethics, Opacity and Relationality

The immersive spatial engagement in *Of course everything is real* builds on Orupabo's previous work but marks a shift in how the cut operates. Where earlier works, such as the paper collages *Untitled* (2018) and *Two Heads* (2022), discussed in Section 7.1, foreground the cut as a rupture in re-presentation — disrupting the photographic surface to expose its historical and epistemological violence — *Of course everything is real* extends this disruption into an immersive, fragmented, spatial experience that unsettles the viewer's perceptual and bodily orientation. The work thus invites a more sensuous engagement, in which the body becomes the threshold through which aesthetic force is felt, relocating relation from visual mastery to embodied proximity. This transition signals a crucial development in Orupabo's engagement with opacity and fragmentation, moving toward an immersive, destabilizing encounter where the cut is registered both visually and through the viewer's embodied sensibility.

By challenging the dualisms that constitute modern spectatorship, this work invites the viewer into an encounter where opacity may be experienced as a decentering force. In this sense, the cut functions as Moten's notion of the uncontainable “cry” — a force that reveals the limits of structured, dualistic thinking by insisting on an affective presence that resists conceptual containment. However, this work is not about dissolving boundaries between self and the Other — it is about a refusal of assimilation into a fixed relationality, an act of fugitivity within opacity that pushes beyond the constraints of visibility and legibility.

This refusal of fixed relationality aligns with Glissant's notion of opacity, which resists categorical knowing and insists on an indeterminate presence. Orupabo's work does not seek to reveal a fully legible subject; rather, it generates a new form of subjectivation through opacity. As Glissant argues, opacity involves a refusal to participate in a visual economy predicated on legibility, where the subject's very definition relies on its ability to define the Other. For Glissant, opaque works are not created to offer clarity, rather they are created to “dismantle.. forms of oppression.”⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁸ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2,107; Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 204.

In *Of course everything is real* opacity implicates the viewer as subject, but it does so — not by dissolving boundaries — but by challenging the comparative dualisms that constitute modern subjectivity. Here, the three-dimensional cut in its most overt form, unfolds as a locus of both contact and separation, presence, and absence — structuring new forms of relation. It marks our capacity to approach the Other while resisting any attempt at full comprehension or possession. The cut, then, is not merely a spatial rupture but an intervention that holds open an ethical space in difference— inviting an open-ended engagement.

Extending Lévinas' thought, the installation draws the viewer into a space of radical openness and affective instability — an encounter that unsettles intentionality, order, and control, sustaining a space where radical otherness — opacity — remains irreducible. In this context, the caressing gaze becomes an ethical mode of engagement where the viewer is prohibited from maintaining a stabilized position. This ethical space in difference involves transposing the beholder from the position of the voyeur — a position of mastery that relies on sustaining a distance — to one that draws closer in proximity, relinquishing power over the perceived.

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7.3.6 The caressing gaze in *Of Course Everything is Real*

As previously discussed, Lévinas' notion of the caress foregrounds ethical proximity as an encounter that unsettles mastery. The caress unfolds as an embodied relation that does not collapse difference but sustains an ethical form of proximity. Reconfiguring the caress as a gaze, I extend this ethical engagement into the visual realm, seeking a mode of approach that neither stabilizes nor assimilates but instead sustains a proximate relation charged with uncertainty. This gaze does not seek to grasp or render fully knowable; it approaches opacity as something to be met with an openness that neither claims nor consumes. As Lévinas writes;

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁹ See my discussion of the caressing gaze in section 6.0-6.4.

⁶⁸⁰ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257–58.

This refusal of assimilation is central to Orupabo's work, which resists absorption into familiar representational logics. In *Of course everything is real*, the installation disperses facial fragments over fractured spatial planes, rather than offering a fixed perspective, destabilizing any singular perspective. The viewer's body is implicated in this instability — drawn into a field where spatial depth is uncertain, where fragments emerge and recede, opening onto an engagement that is not purely optical but also affective and spatial.

The caressing gaze does not function as a means of mastery or totalization but as an encounter that unfolds in the space of opacity —where meaning remains irreducible, and the subject resists full capture. As Lévinas writes, the caress “does not know what it seeks”; it is “like a game with something slipping away, absolutely without project and plan”.⁶⁸¹ The continual slipping away of an Otherness beyond grasp mirrors the way presence in *Of course everything is real* seems to dissolve as the viewer moves through the installation, unfolding a mode of engagement that moves away from knowledge or possession, remaining open to what always eludes. As Lévinas suggests, the caress “is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable,” it does not seek to know but gestures beyond —desiring yet never grasping — moving toward what remains unknowable and forever beyond reach.⁶⁸²

This instability of relation resonates with Moten's assertion that one must “listen while you look” as Black art cannot be fully apprehended through vision alone.⁶⁸³ By exceeding the optical regime of racial surveillance and mastery, the installation resists containment within a purely optical framework.⁶⁸⁴ The caressing gaze, in turn, does not yield a stabilizing or controlling relation: It unfolds an encounter where proximity is charged with uncertainty, and opacity holds space for the irreducibility of the Other. As Drabinski writes in his reading of Lévinas, the caress preserves alterity and recasts intersubjectivity as singularity, “difference, multiplicity, and differentiation”.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸¹ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 89.

⁶⁸² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.

⁶⁸³ In relation to this, Moten develops the concept of “bone-deep listening”. While bone-deep listening offers an important mode of engagement that resists capture and ocular centrism, it does not explicitly address the ethical responsibilities of the viewer. The caressing gaze, by contrast, provides a more explicitly ethical framework for engaging Orupabo's work. It foregrounds the ethical relation between viewer and artwork, resisting appropriation and mastery. This matter is of particular importance for white viewers, which risk reproducing colonial ways of seeing. Beyond individual spectatorship, this approach may also inform curatorial and critical engagement, where an attentiveness to how power is distributed and reproduced through formations of seeing remains essential.

⁶⁸⁴ Moten, *In The Break*, 188.

⁶⁸⁵ Drabinski, “Vernacular Solidarity,” 183.

In *Of course everything is real*, the cut unfolds as what Lévinas describes as the very “gap between approach and approached”, provoking and sustaining a sensuous relation where we are affected by the artwork “without the source of affection” becoming reducible to representation.⁶⁸⁶ The caress is not an abstract ethical demand but always already implicated pre-reflexively in the embodied encounter — in skin, in touch. As Crignon argues, Lévinas’ Face does not stand apart from the body but emerges within its very exposure, “wed[ding] the skin that calls forth the caress.”⁶⁸⁷ The caressing gaze is not a distanced ethical stance but an affective mode of proximity, an openness to fugitivity which remains responsive to what eludes. Crucially, the caress does not resolve fugitivity; it lingers within its refusal, holding space for an excess that resists mastery. In this sense, *Of course everything is real* does not just unsettle visibility, but unsettles the very conditions of relation—where presence is not registered as something to be fully known, but something to be felt. This refusal of legibility does not close off relation; it operates instead as a decentering force, insisting on a mode of engagement that exceeds categorical knowing.

⁶⁸⁶ Lévinas, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 81; Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258.

⁶⁸⁷ Philippe Crignon et al., “Figuration: Emmanuel Lévinas and the Image,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182507>.

7.4 The insurgent Body: Fungibility, Futurity and the Hybrid Cut

A lean, ambiguously gendered Black body is rendered in a frontal view, pieced together from photographic fragments in a way that challenges anatomical coherence. The figure's legs are parted, a baby's head emerging between them. Hovering in a state of metamorphosis, the figure can be seen to unsettle binary distinctions of gender, opening onto transformation and renewal as registers of agency. Its transgressive openness is echoed in posture and pose — in the parting of the legs, the tilt of the pelvis, and the exposure of birth. Assembled and remade through cutting and pinning, it occupies a state of becoming rather than resolution (Figure 15). This birthing body does not resolve into a seamless or static unity; rather, it conveys a sense of plasticity and becoming.

Untitled 2017 complicates the juxtapositional and three-dimensional cuts discussed in Chapter 6, by grafting ontologically incongruent fragments through a technique that hovers between the two.⁶⁸⁸ In what follows, I consider how this method may destabilize categories of both being and form, gesturing toward becoming and futurity. This incongruity of fragments opens onto what I have defined as the juxtapositional cut, yet the technique employed — cutting, layering, and pinning— recalls the sculptural instability of the three-dimensional cut. It is in this tension, between incongruity and suspension, rupture, and potentiality—that Orupabo's method complicates and extends the distinctions I have previously drawn between the juxtapositional and three-dimensional cut, generating effects that neither mode can fully contain.

As discussed in Section 6.4, the juxtapositional cut brings fragments from distinct temporal, cultural or visual registers into forced proximity, where their incongruities generate a suspended tension within grid-like structures. Crucially, this collision depends on a space of

⁶⁸⁸ I use the 'hybrid cut' to describe instances in which the juxtapositional and three-dimensional cut operate together, specifically where ontologically incongruent content is joined within a single figure by layering and pinning. Whereas the juxtapositional cut, as outlined in Section 6.4.4, 6.4.5, holds temporal, cultural, or visually disparate material in the suspended proximity of a grid-like composition, the hybrid cut folds such incongruence into a single body. In some collages, Orupabo combines human with nonhuman elements (for example human bodies with animal or sculptural parts) in ways I would also read as hybrid cuts. The effects of the hybrid cut, however, are not uniform. What remains consistent is its destabilization of categorical and ontological boundaries. Rather than designating a third stable category, the hybrid cut marks a site where Orupabo's method unsettles the typology I have outlined in Section 7.4.

separation —one in which fragments are not subsumed into a unified whole but remain distinct, their singularity producing friction in proximity. The three-dimensional cut, by contrast, produces affect through a spatial instability, confronting the viewer with a body that wavers between cohesion and collapse.



Figure 15: Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2017. Collage with paper pins. 95x85cm. Private collection. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

Untitled 2017 departs from both strategies. Heterogeneous fragments, such as a male torso, curvaceous legs, and the emerging head of a child, are not held apart in frictional proximity but configured within a single transgressive body. *Untitled 2017*, however, unfolds differently from both the affective proximity of the juxtapositional cut and the sculptural instability of the three-dimensional cut. What this work refuses is not so much wholeness but *stillness*. Instead of the precarious provisionality that threatens collapse, the figure conveys a sense of fluid unfolding, as if always in the process of metamorphic transformation. This unfolding is reinforced by the narrative element of the birth process itself, which renders the body, not static, but durational, caught in a moment of emergence. In this hybrid cut, the juxtaposition of heterogeneous image material does not produce affective friction, nor does the sculptural instability of the three-dimensional cut produce a wounded suspension. Rather, Orupabo's meticulous cutting, layering, and pinning endow the figure with a pliability that suggests a refusal of fixity. The result is a metamorphic, transgressive body that seems poised for continual evolvment. This points not to a synthesis of the juxtapositional and three-dimensional cut, but to a site of reconfiguration where the distinction I previously outlined between these cuts in Section 6.4 -6.5 is subjected to pressure and unsettled. In this sense, the hybrid cut marks a limit-point in my earlier distinctions, pointing to how Orupabo's practice continually resists attempts at categorization.

7.4 1 The monstrous body and the Pliability of flesh

In its combination of male and female body parts, *Untitled 2017* may be approached in relation to Hortense Spillers' formulation of the *monstrous*. Toward the end of her landmark essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. An American Grammar Book* Spillers points to the possibility of a monstrous body that might emerge from the condition of "ungendering."⁶⁸⁹ She defines ungendering as the violent stripping of gender from Black women's flesh, a dispossession produced by the sexualization, commodification, and objectification of enslaved women during the Middle Passage.⁶⁹⁰ From this placement outside the traditional symbolics of gender, she gestures toward another grammar of embodiment, even as it arises from the violent condition of "flesh" rendered fungible under slavery.⁶⁹¹ Spillers insists that "we [Black women] are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject," envisioning a monstrosity with the

⁶⁸⁹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

⁶⁹⁰ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67–68.

⁶⁹¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

“potential to name.” Even the controlling image of Sapphire — a derogatory stereotype of the angry Black woman — she suggests, might be rewritten into a “radically different text for female empowerment.”⁶⁹² By reworking such stereotypes, Black women can “name” and determine themselves, rewriting culturally and historically imposed narratives. Read through Spillers, the wounding inflicted by the institution of slavery bears a paradoxical potential: it exposes the limits of liberal categories of ideal femininity and opens the possibility for a social subject *outside* of normative womanhood.⁶⁹³ If, as Professor C. Riley as suggests in his reading of Spillers, the ungendering of Black women’s flesh renders it what we might understand as ontologically pliable, Orupabo’s hybrid cut can be read as reconfiguring pliability otherwise articulating a mercurial body whose force lies precisely in its refusal to be fixed ontologically —resonating with what Snorton describes as Black flesh’s capacity to “change form” under the conditions of fungibility.⁶⁹⁴ At the same time, this reconfiguration gives us pause by exposing the otherwise invisible rules through which surplus is ordinarily assimilated and neutralized.

Snorton extends Spillers account by linking *fungibility* to *fugitivity*, suggesting that the violent reduction of Black flesh to fungible matter under slavery also produced a fraught pliability. It is precisely this pliability that, according to Snorton, that becomes a resource for imaging gender as mutable and open to rearrangement. In this sense, fungibility is not only a site of dispossession but also the grounds for what Snorton calls the “performances *for* rather than *of* freedom.”⁶⁹⁵ From this point of departure, Orupabo’s *Untitled 2017* operates through a hybrid cut that assembles a body that does not settle into categorical stability, opening onto what might be understood as a fugitive becoming structured through the hybrid cut. Here, her act of cutting opens a space for re-articulating an image such as Sapphire beyond caricature into generative, transgressive forms that unsettle dominant representational structures projected onto the racialized body. Following Spillers and Snorton, the hybrid cut may be

⁶⁹² Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 80.

⁶⁹³ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

⁶⁹⁴ C. Riley Snorton, “Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the Matter of Being,” in *Black on Both Sides, A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 59, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7dz.6>.

⁶⁹⁵ C. Riley Snorton, “Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the Matter of Being,” in *Black on Both Sides, A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 58, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7dz.6> Snorton explicitly situates fungibility within a genealogy of transness, linking it to the mutability of gender and trans performances for freedom. Orupabo often combines male and female body parts in her collages, a dimension that could warrant further investigation in relation to transness. My focus here, however, is on the transformation and futurity rather than trans identity specifically.

approached as a fugitive practice: one that refigures the fungibility of flesh as a condition that can be reworked toward insurgent possibility. As Orupabo herself has explained in a conversation with Maya Binyam, her collage practice offers her a way “of writing [herself] in” —creating what “doesn’t otherwise exist.”⁶⁹⁶ What Snorton describes as fungibility’s capacity for “ontological rearrangement” helps us approach Orupabo’s hybrid cut as reconfiguring the body beyond archival constraints.⁶⁹⁷ Read together with Spillers’ call for “*insurgent ground*,” this provides a language for grasping the generative potential of such a body.⁶⁹⁸

This insurgent potential also complicates the rendering of the Black female body as wounded flesh. In my analysis of *Baby in Belly*, I argued that Orupabo’s cut draws attention to the fractured photographic surfaces as both symbolic and wounded. In *Untitled 2017*, however, Orupabo’s hybrid cut complicates the narrativization of the Black female body as a wounded body. Here the monstrous body Spillers envisions emerges not only from woundedness, but through it, asserting transformation as an insurgent possibility.

This figure insists less on being than on *becoming*.

7.4.2 Cutting as Fugitive Practice

If, as I have discussed elsewhere, the photographs produced within colonial visual regimes sought to fix and objectify the Black body, Orupabo’s cut performs a displacing intervention on that colonial archive. Rather than reassembling the fragments to coherence, her cutting introduces opacity, withholding the body from legibility and mastery. At this instance, Orupabo’s cut comes close to inhabiting Grønstad’s account of the ethical cut, which he, drawing on postcolonial thought, including, Édouard Glissant’s concept of opacity, describes as the ethical force of aesthetic form as an “affirmation of the values of uncertainty, openness, and opacity”⁶⁹⁹ In this account, the cut withholds the body from interpretive mastery; producing what Celia Britton, drawing on Glissant, describes as “an *unintelligible* presence from within the visible presence of the colonized”.⁷⁰⁰ It becomes, in Britton’s words,

⁶⁹⁶ Binyam, “Stealing It Back.”

⁶⁹⁷ Snorton, “Trans Capable,” 74.

⁶⁹⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 80.

⁶⁹⁹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 8.

⁷⁰⁰ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 25.

an “active production of a visible but unreadable image”.⁷⁰¹ This mode of opacity does not sever relation but reconfigures it on different terms: Terms grounded in opacity and irreducibility that resist the colonial demand for comprehension.⁷⁰²

By combining male and female body parts of differing pigmentation in a way that disrupts normative anatomical coherence, Orupabo’s cut may be seen as an intervention that allows difference to manifest within representation without resolving into coherence. As I have previously argued, Orupabo’s three-dimensional cuts often produces instability that unsettles representational coherence from within. *Untitled 2017*, however, differs: while constructed through similar techniques of cutting and pinning, its force lies less in a wavering between cohesion and collapse than in a metamorphic, fluid unfolding. The recurrence of this undefinable body across different settings —floating against a white background or situated within a bedroom-like interior— opens for a consideration of the cut not only as a material intervention, but as a process of reactivation.

As I argued in Section 6.5.2, opacity produced through Orupabo’s cut does not perform a total withdrawal, rather, it introduces opacity as a resistant presence that unsettles the objectifying logics of transparency mobilized as a tool of control. Instead of reducing the subject to something knowable, Orupabo situates the subject within the “stubborn shadows” —the indeterminate space between legibility and illegibility, visibility and refusal⁷⁰³ This refusal does not end at disruption: through the recurrence of fragments across different works and contexts Orupabo extends the cut beyond a singular moment, transforming it into an ongoing practice that resists what Allan Sekula has described as the archive’s disciplining and regulatory function, which sought to render bodies legible within state and colonial frameworks.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰¹ Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, 24.

⁷⁰² For a fuller discussion of Glissant’s critique of Enlightenment rationality and his articulation of opacity as a counter to the colonial demand for transparency, see Chapter 3.

⁷⁰³ Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (University of Virginia Press, 1999), 24–25; Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, with J. Michael Dash, CARAF Books (University Press of Virginia, 1989), 4.

⁷⁰⁴ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive.”

7.5 Recurrence as resistance: Refusing the fixating effect of the colonial archive

I have already discussed recurrence in relation to Orupabo's practice: first in Section 6.4.5, where I examined how fragments migrate between digital and analog platform, and again in Section 6.5.3, where I argued that recurrence can itself be understood as a temporal extension of the cut: fragments return in new configurations, refusing closure and destabilizing indexical meaning.⁷⁰⁵ As noted, Kember and Zylinska describe differential cutting as a fundamental process of mediation, where cutting structures both meaning and relationality.⁷⁰⁶ While Orupabo's reuse of photographic fragments can be read alongside this account, her practice does not unfold as a singular epistemological interruption. Instead, it unfolds through repeated recontextualizations across time, producing *an ongoing refusal of stabilization*. In this section, I build on this temporal and material unfolding to examine recurrence as a broader epistemic and aesthetic strategy. Through the repeated recontextualization of colonial image fragments, Orupabo's cut can be seen to enact both resistance and persistence, transforming it into an anti-colonial, embodied practice, where meaning is never fully settled.

7.5.1 Portikus

To further explore this continuous process, we may take as our point of departure the recurrence of multiple faces in Orupabo's collages. Across her works, and at times within the same work, the same faces appear in shifting configurations —sometimes fragmented, sometimes layered, sometimes combined with other bodies or elements. In the mural-like, site-specific installation presented in the exhibition *the mouth and the truth* at Portikus in 2019 (Figure 16), the face of the same Black individual —depicted in a frontal view evocative of classificatory anthropometrics—recurs insistently, multiplied across the same composition. Pinned onto multiple bodies in peculiar configurations, the face appears repeatedly across different torsos and limbs. The resulting figures resemble articulated paper-puppets, where bodies are assembled from detachable parts. The doll-like articulation of these figures introduces a register of childish play that intersects with tropes of infantilization and

⁷⁰⁵ I use the term recurrence to describe the way fragments return in new constellations and shifting contexts, both digital and analog platforms, within individual works and across different works.

⁷⁰⁶ See my discussion of Kember and Zylinska's term "differential cutting" in Section 6.4).

caricature, laying bare rather than simply reproducing, the classificatory frameworks through which colonial regimes rendered racialized bodies seemingly legible and knowable.⁷⁰⁷

The proliferation of the face across multiple bodies and contexts, whether or not this circulation is fully perceptible to the viewer, has a double effect. It points to identity as contingent and reconfigured across contexts, opening onto its irreducibility by resisting what Sekula has described as the archive's fixing function, though which identity is stabilized into a coherent form.⁷⁰⁸ Yet this insistent recurrence also introduces risk, as repetition can echo visual modes historically tied to classification and typology, where multiplication served to fix racial identity. The recurrence recalls the template of the paper doll, whose interchangeable parts can be endlessly rearranged, a process that echoes the colonial construction of the racialized body as fungible flesh—a reproducible commodity deprived of individuality.⁷⁰⁹ As paper cutouts, the fragment also foregrounds surface, brushing against colonial visual regimes that treated Blackness as epidermal and depthless, a surface to be read as a totality. At the same time, as Kobena Mercer has observed in relation to Black diaspora art more broadly, recursive strategies of repetition can also acquire an eruptive, dialogical force. As Mercer writes, “what matters most are the inflections and accentuations by which signifiers get lifted out of established codes in acts of appropriation that dispute what is accepted as reality.”⁷¹⁰ In this sense, Orupabo's continual recontextualization of archival fragments interrupts the coherence of representation and, following Mercer, enacts a disruptive re-accentuation of archival imagery. This re-accentuation does not neutralize the danger inherent in repetition; rather, it sustains a fragile tension in which the recurring fragment continually risks being drawn into the very visual registers it was lifted from, thus giving us pause. In the Portikus installation, the recurring circulation of cut fragments denies the possibility of a coherent, unmediated access to historical reality. Instead, her work foregrounds the photograph as something cut, extracted, and repeatedly reconfigured: a detachable and historically conditioned image object. In this sense, Orupabo's work also

⁷⁰⁷ Orupabo's use of doll-like bodies, costumes and exaggerated proportions resonate with colonial practices of infantilization and caricature, which denied racialized subjects of adult agency while subjecting them to ridicule. While this dimension lies beyond the scope of the present discussion, the resonances underscore the satirical and violent registers folded into her practice of reusing fragments across platforms and works.

⁷⁰⁸ See discussion Section 6.5.

⁷⁰⁹ I use the term fungible flesh with reference to Hortense Spillers' analysis of the transatlantic slave trade, where the captive body is reduced to “flesh” and made available as fungible property. See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

⁷¹⁰ Mercer, *Travel & See*, 20–27.

pushes the argument developed in Section 6.5.2 and 6.5.3 further: that subaltern histories cannot be accessed outside the dominant representational regimes through which they were produced. Rather than reclaiming history, her work exposes the structural conditions that bind subaltern histories to the very representational regimes that produced them.

If the dual apparatuses of the colonial and scientific gaze sought to reduce and classify, Orupabo's work gestures toward a different mode of looking, a mode that lingers with ambiguity rather than seeking resolution. In doing so, the excision and multiplication of the face also draws attention to its own condition as a fragment, something taken, or "stolen," to use Orupabo's term.⁷¹¹ The work makes the cut palpable, exposing the violence of extraction and the generative potential for reconfiguration. Laid out on a low platform, the viewer was required to bend, turn, or climb a nearby staircase to apprehend the composition as a whole. This embodied mode of viewing unsettles the distanced, classificatory gaze historically associated with anthropometric photography, requiring the viewer to engage the work from shifting vantage points rather than a single authoritative view. After the exhibition at Portikus, the site-specific installation was divided into multiple works—two of which are now housed in Astrup Fernley's collection (Figure 17 and 18). The transformation of one large-scale composition into discrete works further aligns with Orupabo's practice of resisting singular interpretation, dispersing meaning across multiple iterations. This unfolding is not just an aesthetic intervention but an ongoing process of reconfiguration that traverses both digital and material forms.

⁷¹¹ Binyam, "Stealing It Back."



Figure 16. Frida Orupabo, *the mouth and the truth*, Portikus, Frankfurt/Main, Photo: Diana Pfammatter, Courtesy: Frida Orupabo, Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin.



Figure 17. Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2019. Collage med papirpins 180 x 1745 cm, Astrup Fearnley collection, Photo: Thomas Widerberg.



Figure 18: Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2019. Collage with paper 180 x 175 cm, Astrup Fearnley collection. Photo: Thomas Widerberg.

This process of reappearance is not confined to the Portikus piece alone. Across Orupabo's broader practice, fragments recur across distinct works and platforms, underscoring recurrence as a strategy of resistance in which the fragment is never settles into final form. At the same time, the insistent duplication of fragments —across the Portikus installation and throughout Orupabo's practice— carries its own risks. Multiplied frontal views inevitably recall the visual mode of typology, which sought to exploit photography's perceived neutrality as both evidence and record, fixing Black subjects within regimes of classification.

⁷¹² Orupabo's practice hovers in this tension: while repetition risks echoing typological fixation, her fragments remain unstable and mobile, preventing their consolidation into a definitive type.

While the same faces and body parts reappear in different contexts, their original sources remain unknown. Orupabo rarely discloses where she has found the original photograph, deliberately frustrating attempts to trace the image back to a singular archival origin. In conversation, she has explained that this stems from her deep skepticism toward the reliability of archival metadata. More often than not, she noted, the details provided are partial and shaped by ideological structures —for instance, “a recorded name is typically a slave name rather than the subject's original one.” As she put it, “most of the faces are from the colonial archives: Different body parts will often be from other sources. It is important to me to recontextualize the images.”⁷¹³ She has also described this practice as “stealing back,” a pointed reversal of what Sekula described as the “archive's inverse,”⁷¹⁴ the entanglement of portraiture with systems of capture and regulation through which such images were first collected.⁷¹⁵

Orupabo's *stealing back* unsettles the regulating force of the archive, displacing fragments from a regime of capture and possession and relocating them into new and shifting constellations that resists epistemological mastery. In this sense, Orupabo's decision to withhold names and metadata stands in marked contrast to other approaches to the colonial

⁷¹² Kobena Mercer has traced similar recursive strategies across Black diaspora art, noting how artists such as Lorna Simpson, Joy Gregory and Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons use repetition, cropping, or inversion to interrupt conventions of portraiture and to challenge assumptions that looking is the equivalent of knowing. While these artists share an insistence on resisting closure, Orupabo extends recurrence across works and platforms. See Section 3.3 where I discuss this genealogy. For further reading see: Mercer, *Travel & See*, 20-27.

⁷¹³ Orupabo, studio visit, 8 October 2024.

⁷¹⁴ Binyam, “Stealing It Back.”

⁷¹⁵ See my discussion of Sekula in Section 6.5.1

archive. For example, in relation to Joseph Zealy's ethnographic daguerreotypes, many scholars and artists have emphasized the importance of naming the sitters, seeking to restore subjectivity and resists the anonymity imposed by pseudo-scientific classification. Orupabo can be seen to employ a distinct mode of resistance: fragments circulate without archival identifiers, frustrating the drive toward legibility and reclaiming opacity as a mode of liberation.

As I noted in Section 6.5.3, Grønstad has argued that the archival image can be understood as “unfinished inscriptions,” which he defines as “a unit of meaning stabilized only temporarily, and always awaits its own future reappropriation.”⁷¹⁶ Revisiting Grønstad's broader discussion of the cut, he also links it to an “ethics of form,” where opacity materializes within representation as an affirmation of uncertainty and openness.⁷¹⁷ In Orupabo's case this potential is both performed and reconfigured: she operates at the level of the fragment, with recurrence moving beyond repetition into a processual persistence that continually unsettles meaning and relation. In doing so, recurrence does not move beyond representation but prevents its stabilization into a coherent form, sustaining a condition of ongoing reconfiguration. Rather than working with the archival image as a whole, Orupabo intervenes at the level of fragments that she excises from digital reproductions of predominantly archival images circulating online. In doing so, she reworks images that were once instrumental in colonial regimes of classification, displacing faces, and body parts into new and shifting constellations that resist fixation. In this sense, recurrence unfolds incrementally as faces, limbs, and other cut elements continually return in new combinations across platforms and exhibitions. Where Grønstad links his notion of “unfinished inscriptions” to an opacity grounded in material impenetrability,⁷¹⁸ Orupabo's practice pushes this further: opacity here emerges through *processual persistence*, as bodily fragments return in shifting constellations that resist the classificatory force of the archive.⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁶ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 197.

⁷¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of Grønstad's notion of “an ethics of form” and its relation to opacity, see 6.4.6 and 6.4.7.

⁷¹⁸ By material impenetrability I am referring to Grønstad's discussion of the physical and formal quality of an image that resists cognitive mastery, linguistic fixing, and transparent representation. See Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 128.

⁷¹⁹ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 199.

7.5.2 Two Women

A particularly interesting example is the work *Two Women* first shown in Kyiv in 2021. In this installation, Orupabo presented fragments in two distinct modes of display. On a low platform, viewers encountered loose cut-outs, featuring punctured holes that evoked the precarious potentiality associated with the paper doll. Viewers were invited to rearrange these fragments at will or attach them to rivet-like fixtures on the adjacent wall. The only fragment permanently fixed in place depicted a Black woman gazing out at the viewer. These two different modes of display offered a glimpse into Orupabo's process, foregrounding the fragment as a working unit that circulates in flux before being temporarily fixed into composition, the installation materializes recurrence as a condition of Orupabo's practice, where fragments remain mobile rather than stabilizing into images—that is, as coherent, legible representational objects. Photographs taken a week apart show the altered composition, underscoring the work's provisional and reconfigurable character (Figure 19, 20, 21).

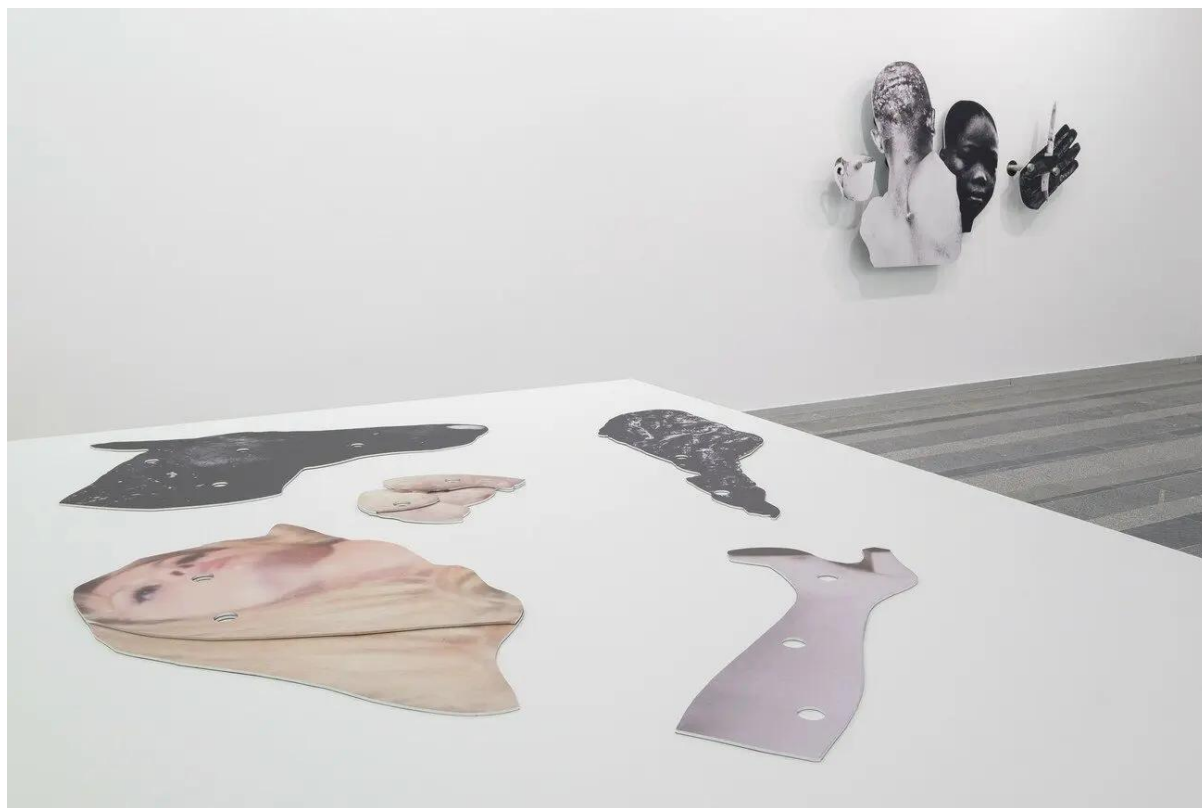


Figure 19: Frida Orupabo, *Two Women*, 2021 as presented at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kyiv in 2021. Primed anodized aluminum with digital UV print, velour foil. 129,04 cm x 215,13 x 15 cm, dimensions for the 12 individual pieces vary. Photographs provided by the PinchukArtCentre © 2021. Photographed by Maksym Bilousov.



Figure 20: Frida Orupabo, *Two Women*, 2021, as presented at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kyiv in 2021. primed anodized aluminum with digital UV print, velour foil. 129,04 cm x 215,13 x 15 cm, dimensions for the individual pieces vary. Photographs provided by the PinchukArtCentre © 2021. Photographed by Maksym Bilousov.



Figure 21: Frida Orupabo, *Two Women*, 2021, as presented at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kyiv in 2021. Primed anodized aluminum with digital UV print, velour foil. 129,04 cm x 215,13 x 15 cm, dimensions for the individual pieces vary. Photographs provided by the PinchukArtCentre © 2021. Photographed by Maksym Bilousov.



Figure 22: Frida Orupabo, *Two Women*, as presented at Astrup Fearnley Museum in 2025. Primed anodized aluminum with digital UV print, velour foil. 129,04 cm x 215,13 x 15 cm. Photograph: Private.

When the work was later shown at the Astrup Fearnley Museum in 2025 (Figure 22), Orupabo brought these two strands together. Rather than presenting the fragments within an open, reconfigurable display, the elements were mounted on the wall behind a guard wire, producing the appearance of a single, stabilized collage. The adjacent low table with loose fragments, which previously allowed viewers to rearrange the composition, was no longer present. What earlier appeared as a work open to revision now appeared fixed into a unified, stabilized configuration. What had begun as two divergent modes of display thus re-emerged at Astrup Fearnley as a unified composition, underscoring recurrence as a process of reconfiguration rather than closure. Yet this installation also introduces a new tension. Orupabo typically uses split pins that evoke the play of assembly and reassembly and lend her collages a sense of provisionality, gesturing toward the recurrence of fragments across different constellations. By contrast, the fragments here are fixed together with oversized, industrial fastenings. This more definitive mode of attachment curtailed the openness characteristic of her work, introducing a tension within recurrence itself: between the fragment's potential for reconfiguration and its forceful stabilization into fixed form. This oscillation between openness and closure also underpins *Of Course Everything is Real*, where recurrence operates across exhibition contexts and through the internal reconfigurations of the fragments within the work.

7.5.3 Of Course Everything is Real

Of Course Everything is Real (Figure 23 and 25) has been exhibited in two markedly different ways.⁷²⁰ In the exhibition “On Lies, Secrets, and Silence” at Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm in 2024, the installation was presented in a darkened room with an exit at the far end. Here fragmented facial features were illuminated by light from a projector, an effect that made them seem to hover within the dark space. When the exhibition travelled to the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo in 2025, the work was placed in a stark white and uniformly lit exhibition space. This shift reoriented recurrence from an immersive, temporal unfolding to a more static encounter. At Bonniers, recurrence unfolded experientially as viewers walked through the darkened space, the fragments appearing and reappearing from shifting vantage points, culminating in a halo-like residue of the projected face on the back wall. This setting produced an encounter with recurrence that was both immersive and disorienting.⁷²¹ By contrast, in Oslo this dimension was muted; the work placed in a brightly lit white cube without an exit at the far end (Figure 29). This setting prompted the viewer to take in the installation from a single vantage point, suspending its temporal unfolding. Instead, recurrence here emerged through alteration, as the orientation of the mouth fragment was altered. The mouth that in Stockholm appeared to grin, was inverted, turned upside down and materially transformed within the composition. The exhibition catalogue itself underscored this instability, presenting side-by-side images of the installation with the mouth oriented both ways within the same dark setting (Figure 27). Taken together, these shifting modes of recurrence, whether through multiplication, reconfiguration, or alteration, consistently refuse stabilization. In this sense, Orupabo’s practice resonates with Glissant’s notion of opacity: not only because it resists a singular interpretation of the cut, but also as an ethical gesture that ensures that the subject remains in flux, resisting epistemological containment by preventing stabilization into a coherent representational form.

⁷²⁰ The installation conditions described here were shaped by the respective exhibition contexts. As the degree of the artist’s involvement in these curatorial decisions is not specified, the analysis focuses on how these exhibition frameworks shape the viewer’s encounter with the work.

⁷²¹ See my analysis of *Of Course Everything is Real* (2024) in section 7.3.



Figure 23. Left: Frida Orupabo, *Of Course Everything is Real*, 2024, CMYK print on anodized aluminum, stainless steel, Left eye: H 110 × W 91 × D 0.5 cm Right eye: H 98 × W 136 × D 0.5 cm Nose: H 70 × W 85 × D 0.5 cm Mouth: H 41.5 × W 101 × D 0.5 cm. As presented in the catalogue for the exhibition *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. Photograph: Bonniers Konsthall (Jean-Baptiste Béranger).

In Orupabo's collages, subjects emerge less as discrete, knowable subjects than as shifting, relational presences assembled from fragments that reappear across multiple works in differing contexts. Recurrence thus shifts the unit of meaning from the individual image to the circulating fragment, whose repeated displacement unsettles the archive's drive to stabilize racialized identity. Such recurrence underscores how cutting in her practice not only separates but sustains an open-ended negotiation of meaning. In this sense, her method can be seen as an ethical intervention into the colonial archive. By excising, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing images across multiple works, platforms, contexts, and temporalities she refuses the colonial archives imperative to fix racialized subjects within an essentialized identity, one that presumes inherent, unchanging characteristics rather than acknowledging the complexity and fluidity of subjectivity. Recurrence, then, may be understood as both a *formal and ethical strategy*, where form itself sustains a relation that resists mastery and opens onto the fragment's irreducibility.



Figure 24. Left: Frida Orupabo, *Of Course Everything is Real*, 2024, CMYK print on anodized aluminum, stainless steel, Left eye: H 110 × W 91 × D 0.5 cm Right eye: H 98 × W 136 × D 0.5 cm Nose: H 70 × W 85 × D 0.5 cm Mouth: H 41.5 × W 101 × D 0.5 cm. Installation view *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Bonniers Konsthall, 2024. Photo: Bonniers Konsthall (Jean-Baptiste Béranger).



Figure 25: Frida Orupabo, *Of Course Everything is Real*, 2024. Installation view *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Astrup Fearnley, 2025. Photo: Ingvild K. Melby.

8.0 On the conditions of approach: Orupabo's Cut and the Ethics of Encounter

This project began with the question of what constitutes an ethical approach to images and artworks shaped by, or responding to, colonial visual regimes. What has emerged through sustained engagement with the work of Frida Orupabo is a reorientation toward the conditions through which relation becomes possible, and the demands these conditions impose. Here, the project takes up bell hooks' insistence on epistemological vigilance that exceeds declarative self-location, attending instead to how perspective is formed, sustained, and transformed through acts of looking. With Glissant, these conditions can be understood as structured by an insistence on transparency and legibility, through which images and subjects are rendered measurable according to an imposed "scale."⁷²² Through Lévinas, this framework is displaced by an ethics grounded in exposure, embodied sensibility, and a responsibility that precedes the encounter. The caressing gaze has been developed here as a methodological orientation that holds these tensions in view, approaching the artwork without seeking to assimilate them into comprehension.

An ethical approach cannot rely on whether images or artworks themselves induce or sustain such relations, particularly where they emerge from visual regimes historically structured by asymmetrical relations of power. The work may intensify the ethical demand, or render it perceptible, but does not secure it. Responsibility is not secured by the work but is already at stake in the conditions of approach, in relation to what remains irreducible and resistant to assimilation. An ethical approach, therefore, cannot be contingent on whether the work produces such destabilization. This shift unsettles the certainty of perception by grounding vision in vulnerability.

While articulated through an engagement with Frida Orupabo's work, this orientation is not restricted to it but suggests one way of approaching images and artworks more broadly. This extends to the conditions under which they are encountered, mediated, including curatorial framing, especially when approaching these works from a site of structural privilege. If, as I have discussed, the photographs produced within colonial visual regimes sought to fix and objectify the Black body, Orupabo's cut performs a displacing intervention on that colonial

⁷²² Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

archive. By excision and recontextualizing across multiple works, platforms, contexts, and temporalities she refuses the colonial archives imperative to fix racialized subjects. This imperative relies on an essentialized identity that presumes inherent, unchanging characteristics rather than acknowledging the complexity and fluidity of subjectivity.

From Hannah Höch's use of the visible cut to expose and dismantle the ideological structures of colonial representation, to the Black Audio Film Collective's use of the cut to interrogate the colonial archive through juxtaposition, and the staging of gaps and absences, Orupabo returns to this trajectory of cutting practices. Through what I term the *three-dimensional cut*, she transforms the cut from a surface intervention into a spatial articulation in which the cut no longer operates solely with the image, but intervenes in the conditions of encounter, producing a bodily and relational disturbance that resists stabilizing into representational coherence.

In Orupabo's work, the cut intervenes within this visual regime by producing a spacing in which relation persists as exposure, resisting assimilation and engaging embodied sensibility without resolving into representational coherence. In its most developed form, this disruption extends further, not only unsettling representational coherence but preventing its stabilization, producing figures that remain in a state of ongoing reconfiguration. In this sense, the relation between ethics and form in Orupabo's work, is not that form embodies or mediates ethical relation, instead, it intervenes in the conditions of encounter by preventing stabilization into epistemic mastery. The cut may thus be understood as a material strategy with ethical implications, through which form opens onto the fragment's irreducibility by disrupting representational coherence. In this sense, the argument extends Grønstad's account of the ethical cut. While Grønstad situates the ethical cut within the "sphere of representation," the argument I developed here understands the cut as operating through representational materials while intervening in the conditions of encounter, allowing relation to persist in ways that cannot be fully contained within a stabilized representational form.⁷²³ This is not a movement beyond representation as such, but a disruption of representational coherence as the condition through which alterity becomes encounterable as a stable, legible form. In this way, the cut intervenes in the colonial archive itself, disrupting the representational coherence through which racialized subjects were historically fixed into legible forms within regimes of knowledge.

⁷²³ Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, 7.

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