SARAH JANE CERVENAK

Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests[1]

> She calls it "harvesting," extracting and collecting imagery from the media and twisting it into something personal, something otherworldly, something new, something about women, race, place, bodies, and our culturewide fixation on stuff. "My work is often a therapy for myself—a working out of these issues as a black woman," she says, as we talk downstairs, her 6-month-old daughter bouncing on her knee. "And a way of allowing other black women to work through this kind of stigmatization as they look through the images and feel how distorted or contorted they might be in the public eye."[2]

IN A RECENT CONVERSATION with art historian Courtney Martin, artist Wangechi Mutu looked at an image of her collage *Pretty Double-Headed* (2010), a collection of cut and applied images of snake skin, brown limbs that contort around black lipsticked lips, a wash of gray and pearl spray paints, floral arrangements that blossom as adornment and suture, and pondered the artwork's relation to her own life. She began with a set of reflections on the term/concept of "home," a word that uneasily refers

1. The title of this essay is a riff on Wangechi Mutu's meditation on the appearance of "explosions" in her work. In response to interviewer Benjy Hansen-Bundy's question about the role hierarchies and explorations of power play in Mutu's compositions, Mutu observed that the forceful or explosive might alternately appear as "blood" or "blossom." See Benjy Hansen-Bundy, "A Fantastic Journey of the Mind of Collage Artist Wangechi Mutu," *Mother Jones*, October 12, 2013, http://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/10/interview-collage-artist-wangechi-mutu-fantastic-journey.
2. Rachel Wolff, "She'll Probably Cut Up This Magazine Too," *New York Magazine*, August 25, 2013, http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2013/wangechi-mutu-2013-9.

to where she currently lives and does her multi-media work (including video, collage, and installations), Brooklyn, New York, United States, as well as the place where she was born and raised, Nairobi, Kenya. Mutu went on to express the ceaseless translational work she's often asked to do, querying the stakes of being doubled/tripled by people not being able to "tell that you're African as opposed to African-American, or Caribbean . . . and what does that mean." *Pretty Doubled Headed*, in some ways, ponders this elusive meaning by querying what happens when one's blackness gets mediated at the mythical interface between thighs that double as mouths and uncaged snakes and floral blossoms.[3]

Powerfully, the insistent multiplicity at the heart of the collagic form at once indicts the dualities she's forced to endure — the disfigurement and blurred vision engendered by the endless symbolic labor blackness is tasked with — and also operationalizes resistance itself. More precisely, as she draws from ethnographic and pornographic magazines, creating life forms that question, essentially, what it means to be gathered into mythicized African and American grammars of blackness and black femaleness, Mutu employs assemblage and collage techniques as a kind of refusal to answer.[4] That is, on the one hand, Mutu is interested in and concerned with representing the primitivizing, racializing, and sexualizing disfigurements that come with being enfolded into another's tapestry of who they think you are; how models in magazines might experience pain when they pose, for example.[5] On the other hand, she is also committed to the otherworldly nonrepresentational potentials of the canvas, its capacity to etherealize other modalities of communion for the previously and endlessly gathered. Lifeworlds: where the harvests she creates and names thrive on the threshold of their mis/

3. Wangechi Mutu, in an interview with Courtney Martin, "Artist Breakfast with Wangechi Mutu," an Artnet event, New York, January 15, 2014, posted on YouTube by ArtTable, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tHm_P-5Pm4.
4. My use of "grammars" here refers to Hortense Spillers's brilliant meditation on slavery's lexiconical reduction of black flesh. See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987).
5. See "Artist Breakfast with Wangechi Mutu."

recognition, where what it means to be harbored accrues another possibility that includes release.

Indeed, Mutu's self-described harvests are at once an occasion to join her acknowledged influences, including painter Frida Kahlo and conceptual artist Ana Mendieta, to reflect on the ways that "females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body."[6] For example, Mutu equates magazines such as *National Geographic* as well as pornography and high fashion with "the fecal matter of culture."[7] As such, her collages might be read as a study in that process whereby black female flesh is cannibalized and digested with the animal, plant, and machinic images enlisted to do a surrogate masticatory work. At the same time, however, there is clearly a resistance to these processes of engulfment and excretion, a refusal discerned in the way the harvested itself sprawls and exceeds her canvas.[8]

In an interview with art critic and historian Deborah Willis, Mutu reveals:

> I was always interested in the power of the body, both as an image and as an actual mechanism through which we exist and find out who we are. I was interested in what goes on inside, but also what people see you as. I was also looking at the history of the body, questioning issues of representation and perception. The body became the mechanism with which I was able to move my mind around all of these issues of otherness, of transplanted-ness as a young woman, my *blackness* as an African-raised black woman in New York City. It became crucial to me to use it as a pivot, you know? But then I realized that it's also a trap. There's something about the body that confines us, that disables us, and that prevents us from being immaterial,

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6. Deborah Willis, "Wangechi Mutu," *Bomb Magazine*, February 28, 2014, http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000052/wangechi-mutu. The quote on the female body is taken from the website for the Saatchi Gallery,London, http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm, quoted from Merrily Kerr, "Wangechi Mutu's Extreme Makeovers," *Art On Paper* 8, no. 6 (July/August 2004).
7. Hansen-Bundy, "A Fantastic Journey."
8. See Denise Ferreira da Silva's brilliant meditation on engulfment as post-Enlightenment, neo-imperial identitarian exercise of violent consumption and enclosure in her *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

> being invisible, being all of these things that maybe you want to be, because maybe you don't want to stand out."[9]

These latter immaterial aspirations in some ways paradoxically appear in Mutu's work as stunning acts of dispersal and deferral. Her works, and in particular her collage pieces, disturb the notion of a center, a place for the eye to land. In that way, her gatherings of image always seem to conspire against the conditions of communion, raising larger questions about histories of coerced and violent gatherings and the other possibilities engendered by assemblies resistant to enclosure.

In *Ectopic Pregnancy* (2004), we see the edges of the canvas tenuously bearing roaming blotches of black glitter. Inside the half-moon-ish shape forged by the glitter lives a cut fragment of a medical illustration, ostensibly of an ectopic pregnancy, given the title of this piece. Separating two eyes are racially and anatomically ambiguous body parts that may be doubling as a nose. Beneath the "nose" is a pair of full lips and teeth stained with blood. To the left and right of the lips are limbs of different skin colors. While the racial and gender identity of the dis/figure swirls powerfully away from the viewer and into the torrent of the "face" at the canvas's center, along with any certitude of whether or not what we're seeing is a face at all, particular bodies nonetheless become visible. For example, while I pondered how this piece might be about black women, considering Mutu's assertion that her work often constitutes a site for black women's working-through, I stumbled across one curator's claim that the work definitively expresses "the idea of Western objectification of women and, in particular, African women."[10] Moreover, art critic Alexandra Raengo argues that *Ectopic Pregnancy* evokes the "splicing" of the "native woman from the original medical text."[11]

At the same time, however, there is not a black woman, an African woman, or a "native" woman visible in the piece. In fact, blackness itself only emerges as a function of a kind of epistemological and historical

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9. Willis, "Wangechi Mutu" (emphasis in original).
10. Philip Gregory, curator of an exhibit of Mutu's work at Drexel University in 2013, quoted in Jenice Armstrong's "Drexel Art Installation Celebrates Female Spirit," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 2013, http://articles.philly.com/2013-02-22/news/37244316_1_wangechi-mutu-drexel-university-african-women.
11. Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 2013), 82.

gathering, an understanding of coercive harvestings that oddly participates in its own making. In other words, a range of ruminations gather in my encounter with the piece — an understanding of Mutu's work as a space for black female therapeutic reassemblage coalesces with an ugly learning of medical knowledge industries' promiscuous reliance on the nineteenth-century slave plantation as a zone of racialized, sexualized, epistemological harvesting.[12] This, moreover, joins with contemplations on the ways that the "vagina" and "Africa" figured as "dark continents" in that same terrible century, with "Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flood[ing both] with light,"[13] with Black African women's wombs figuring as the site for such epistemological and corporeal flooding and collection.

Even so, it is through a drift away from the canvas, a particular epistemological squinting, that these vicious histories become visible. That is, these disastrous collections become discernible, paradoxically, through a similarly aggregative process. While this cognitive act is distinct from and, in fact, agitates against the kinds of aggregations problematized by black feminist critic Hortense Spillers when she discusses the captive body as a kind of a "gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value," it is important to trouble the "tyranny of stillness" at work in catachrestically presuming the presence of a black woman on

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12. Rachel Dudley's particular use of Petra Kupper's concept of the "medical plantation" is especially important here. She writes,

> I assert that the space of the medical plantation was an integral feature in the use of black women's bodies to transform a condition representing an impediment on the slave plantation into a kind of medical entrepreneurship and a discrete branch of medicine. . . . In making this argument, I draw from performance studies scholar Petra Kuppers' concept of the "medical plantation" to refer to a locality spatially separate from the cotton, rice, coffee, sugar, wheat or tobacco plantation and specifically designated for medical practice on enslaved women.

Rachel Dudley, "Towards an Understanding of the 'Medical Plantation' as a Cultural Location of Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 2. See also Petra Kuppers, "The Anarcha Project: Performing in the Medical Plantation," *Advances in Gender Research* 11 (2007).

13. Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 166.

the canvas.[14] In many ways, *Ectopic Pregnancy* is just, and profoundly just, an errant arrangement of broken image, light, and color.

At the same time, however, Mutu's use of body parts, eyes, legs of various hues, and lips signals some kind of aftermath. Maybe there is a kind of mourning project at work in the piece, an acknowledgement of the "precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance."[15] But temporality is tough here. Just because we see scattered limbs doesn't mean that they are the remains of the dead; rather they might be the parts of life Mutu chose to reveal. For Raengo, this aesthetic move and its ambivalence bespeaks Mutu's oppositional deployment of "catachresis." More precisely, Mutu mobilizes the outer and in-between space engendered by catachresis, the "queer" opening made between the "thing and its representation" to simultaneously suggest a loss and unknowable fullness.[16]

Indeed, it's precisely this partiality and anarchy of form and texture, along with a refusal to resolve the shape-shifting tension between black women or racially mixed body parts, black women or rolling grains of glitter, black women or vague medical illustrations that again enacts what Fred Moten might call a "fugitive field of unowning."[17] In this space, just as quickly as the figure of black woman appears she is released, entering elusive realms engendered in the ripples between cut and pasted forms.

What Wangechi Mutu's art makes possible is not just a discharge of black life but the recovery of its right to dis/assemble, to undo, and work through. An enactment of black feminism manifest as blackness's "wander[ing] in the World with the ethical mandate of opening up other ways of knowing and doing?"[18] Rolling grains of glitter. Or more nearly, the condition of possibility of such release, where wandering is an

14. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68; Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.
15. Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 12.
16. Raengo, *On the Sleeve,* 53, 56, 58.
17. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 742.
18. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 81.

undisclosed epistemological opening, is an ethically refigured notion of the harvest: the life harvested refuses to yield itself, hiding and dancing into untrespassable ontological arrangements. Hips meet up with machine guns and the skin of a viper. Indeed, even though Mutu sees her work as a way for "black women to work through [media s]tigmatization," what results from her harvesting is not a rehabilitated, identifiable form.[19] For example, in a conversation with Deutsche Bank, who named her their 2010 Artist of the Year, Mutu mused, "People simplify my work and always see these figures as black women, when it could very well be a purple insect."[20]

Through Mutu's creative reassemblage and decomposition, black women morph into uncontainable and unnamable beings. Moreover, the black feminist implications of Mutu's work arguably extend from her own feminist-identified interests in the contortability of the "female figure" to a domain beyond the figural itself,[21] to unowned worlds engendered by the release and radical dispersal of image, light, and color, worlds where harvests move as unencroachable reimaginings of life, indecipherable gatherings where the formerly used up might get some relief.

For Mutu, the used up has many forms and reaches beyond the limits of bodies and land proper. Sometimes the used up takes the form of discarded plastic and twine. Like an axis of a larger orbit, *Suspended Playtime* (2008) appeared in the center of one of Mutu's recent exhibits, titled "Fantastic Voyage," at Duke University's Nasher Museum in March of 2013. Reflecting Mutu's formal training in sculpture (she earned an MFA at Yale in sculpture), *Suspended Playtime* "includes 200 crude spheres fashioned from stuffed garbage bags bound with twine." The artist explains that "back home," in Kenya, balls like these are fashioned by children in order to play soccer. "They are each made from

19. Wolff, "She'll Probably Cut Up This Magazine Too."
20. "Wangechi Mutu: Between Beauty and Horror," *Art Mag* 58 (December 2009), http://www.db-artmag.com/en/58/feature/wangechi-mutu-between-beauty-and-horror.
21. This is informed by the "Feminist Artist Statement" appearing on a website dedicated to Wangechi Mutu, courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/wangechi-mutu.

shredded paper, junk mail, and other stuff I had lying around my studio," she says of the installation.[22]

Harvesting what remains bespeaks poor people's practices of making do. What's left behind or tossed away engenders magic. But, at the same time, such harvests depend on an object's usefulness, even if that usefulness is expanded and radicalized. What is interesting in *Suspended Playtime*, however, is precisely this act of suspension; part of what the children "back home" philosophized was a time lag between the harvest and its use. Mutu lingers in this time lag and suspends the playtime, calling instead for a kind of reverence, a reverence she sustains by putting these balls in a museum space, a zone where physically playing with the work is forbidden. Such an aesthetic maneuver suggests that what's made "back home," or perhaps "back home" itself, should be left alone; their harvest isn't your plaything. It is perhaps an aesthetic implication with profound importance for those residing in a former settler state.

During the British occupation of Kenya in the late nineteenth century, the hardest hit by the expropriation of land were the Kikuyu, the ethnic group to which Mutu is affiliated. Caroline Elkins writes,

> Though all indigenous groups were affected by the British colonial rule in Kenya, none experienced a transformation as intense as the Kikuyu.... The Kikuyu were agriculturalists who lost over sixty thousand acres to the settlers, mostly in southern Kiambu, a highly fertile region just outside of Nairobi that would become some of the most productive European farmland in the colony. After the British military assault and natural disasters of the late nineteenth century, many Kikuyu migrated back to their ancestral territory in the highlands, only to find Europeans living on their land.[23]

Post-independence, Mutu philosophizes what it means to return to the land and does so through making it more artful than useful. In her art, the land, along with animals and plants, is figured as coextensive with humanity and no longer trampled upon. With respect to the piece *Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her*

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22. Carlos Suarez de Jesus, "Art Mirrors Life in Wangechi Mutu's MOCA show," *Miami New Times*, May 1, 2014.
23. Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Holt, 2005), 12.

The End (2013), Mutu explained in an interview that a handful of Kenyan dirt is sprinkled on the piece's right corner.[24]

Moreover, in many of the works that involve figures, this ethical intervention assumes what Mutu calls "female-ish" form.[25] This is important precisely because it aligns ecological and ontological innovations in gendered being with a gendered critique of settler colonialism. The release of the flesh is coextensive with the release of the land. In *Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her The End*, earth is not the ground but a lively part of the fabled female-ish figure said to be the subject of the work. Rising up from the floor as a composite of slate gray and khaki, the earth is formed through a combination of rescue blankets — the kind, Mutu says, that are distributed to "disaster victims back home" — and shredded garbage bags.[26] As with *Suspended Playtime*, the garbage bags are not there to bear the disposable; instead, along with the rescue blankets, they irreverently ripple and gather. In so doing, they assert a liveliness that extends out from the wall and flows onto the floor, expressing an earth that wants to be unafraid, too.

Growing with, but not on, the earth are an array of painted brown, wriggly stripes, stripes that forge the anchors for two motorcycle "feet" that morph into gray limbs. Regarding the motorcycle feet, it is important to again establish that Mutu is primarily a collage artist. Along with body parts, Mutu collects images of everything from motorcycles to wild animals and de/forms them into moving de/compositions of otherworldly life. She harvests to release, gathers to disperse; there is not a blending here but rather a visible disaggregation: a kind of radical patchwork that celebrates the enduring multiplicities and fundamental partialities of visible life.[27]

In this piece, the "ish" suffix of "female" — the way it pulls at "female's" patriarchal, cis-normative, and heteronormative (supposed) indexical capacity — might move as motorcycle feet that lean into limbs, limbs that soon gently dissolve into an amorphous swash of dark brown

24. See "Artist Breakfast with Wangechi Mutu."
25. Rich Blint, "Interview," *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization,* ed. David Moos (Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010), 99.
26. Suarez, "Art Mirrors Life."
27. My use of the word "disaggregation" is inspired by Monique Allewaert's use of it in her *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Ectopic Pregnancy, 2005. Glitter, collage, ink on found medical illustration paper, 18 × 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photograph by Joshua White.

Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her The End, 2013. Mixed-media wall drawing, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Photograph by Peter Paul Geoffrion.

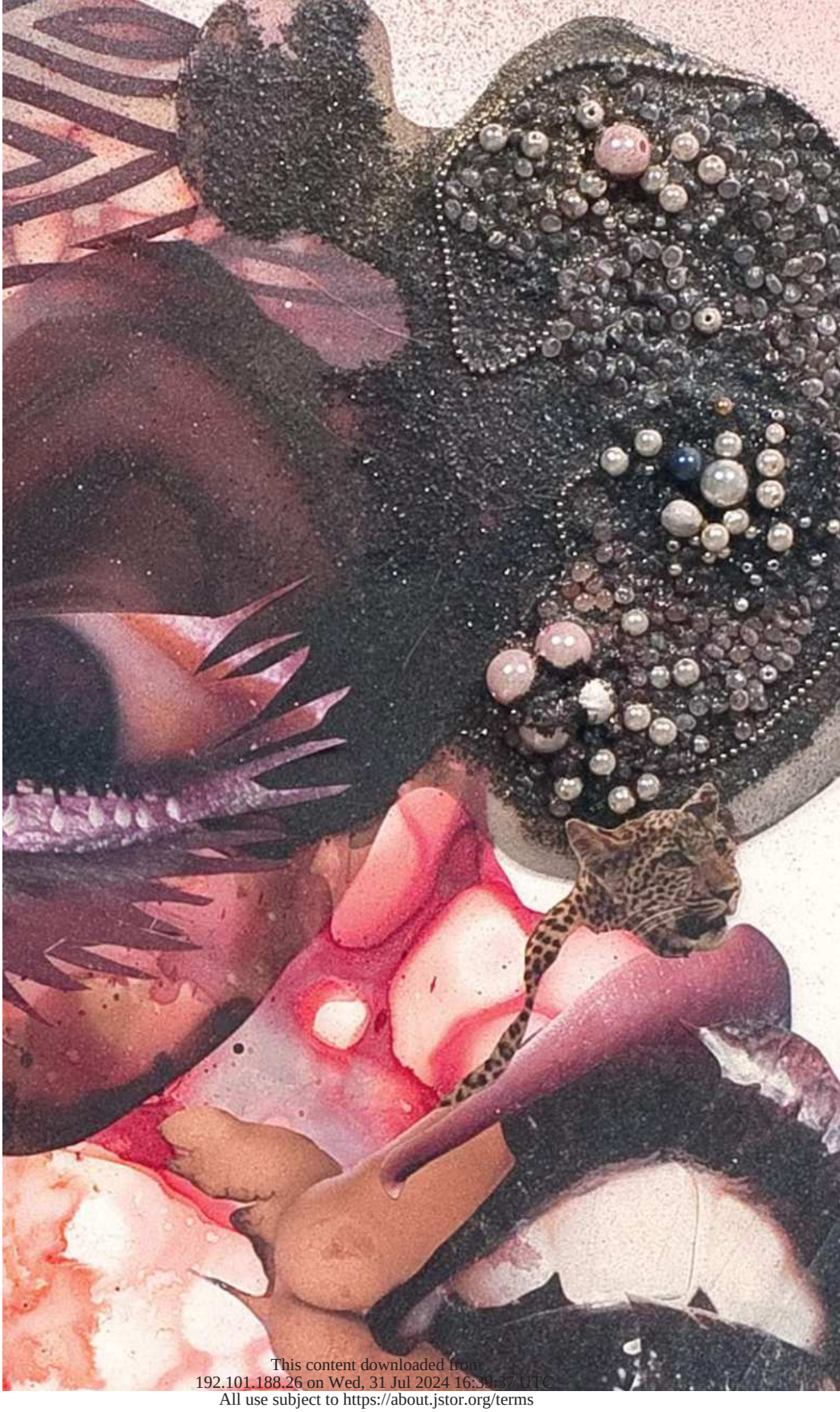
Amazing Grace, 2005.
Super 8 film transferred
to DVD, 7:06 mins.
Edition 1 of 6 +2APs.
Courtesy of the artist
and Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects.

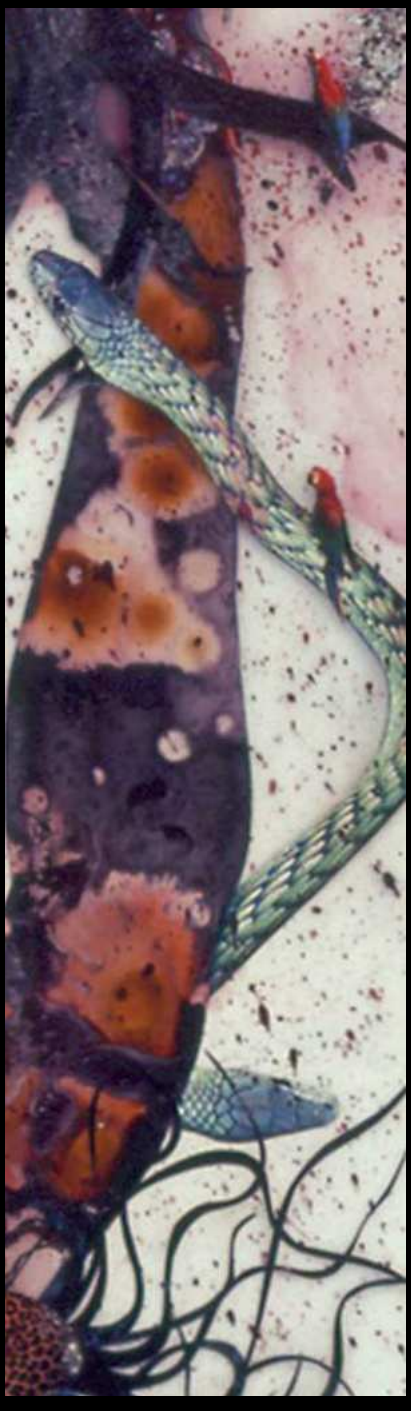
ABOVE
Suspended Playtime, 1 of 3, 2008, details.

OPPOSITE AND FOLLOWING PAGE
Suspended Playtime, 1 of 3, 2008. Black plastic bags, twine, gold string, 44 parts, variable sizes, from 8 to 12 inches in diameter each; overall dimensions 70 × 102 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.

Pretty Double-Head, 2010. Mixed-media, ink, collage, spray paint on Mylar. 34 × 41.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer.

Pretty Double-Head, 2010, details.





Le Noble Savage, 2006, details.

Le Noble Savage, 2006. Ink and collage on Mylar, 25 × 21.5 inches. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, Scarsdale, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.

paint. The paint extends laterally into some categorically resistant matter that shifts from dark brown to a mix of gray, peach, and soft pink. The colors swim into maybe hips, buttocks, and thighs before thinning out into snakeskin-stockinged legs with webbed feet. Moving upward and changing form and color, the dis/figure returns to gray. An upper torso and breasts are stretched outward by the long, gunmetal-colored arms. Looking more closely, the arms themselves amalgamate and decompose into a cluster of ontologies—human, snake (animal), and machine (motorcycles). While the right hand/motorcycle fires a blood splatter of red paint, it also points backward at a furry "animal" head.

So what are her enemies afraid of? Perhaps it's precisely this multiplication of life-forces that at once resist categorization and enacts a not-to-be-fucked with liveliness. Purple insects. Ungovernable grounds. Moreover, what her enemies might be afraid of are the new worlds that become possible once the tyranny of the human gets overthrown by something brown-ish and female-ish just beyond its reach.

Indeed, the insurgencies against a "specific genre of the human [as] Man" erupt, swelling like a tidal wave, along with a flourishing of ungovernable animal, parahuman, plant, and earthly life.[28] This ripples as a dynamic interplay between stitched-together parts and irreverent eruptions of color. Powerfully, a kind of liquidity swirls in Mutu's art and, like an ocean threatens at times to overrun the scattered islands of parts, moves within and against the frame. In *Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies became afraid of her The End*, this liquidity achieves its exemplary expression in the form of blood. The use of blood is instructive both in its pronouncement of bodily fragmentation and for Mutu, its "organic" quality.[29] The recuperation of and commingling of broken life-forms indicates a refusal of Enlightenment definitions of self-same humanity.

The work's deidealization of the human and playful reinhabitation of the parahuman not only foregoes fraudulent Enlightenment promises

28. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 27.
29. Wangechi Mutu, "The Power of Earth in My Work: Essay for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art," n.d., http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/earthmatters/quotes/mutu.html.

but elucidates the ways in which Enlightenment identity requires a kind of coercively aggregative process similar to hegemonic harvesting. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer attest, enlightened self-regulation demands that "whatever might be different is made the same."[30] Robert McRuer and Tiffany Jeannette King take this concept one step further, theorizing such regulation as composition and settlement respectively. For McRuer, composition describes a heteronormative and ableist process that neatly (and violently) gathers up the body, disavowing the queer and cripped "disorderly array of possible human desires and embodiments."[31] In the context of King's work, this disorderly array is said to be materially embodied by native and black bodies in the form of "death" and "fungibility" respectively; sites of harvested negation essential "for the Settler to transcend into a state of humanness."[32]

Moreover, in the post-Enlightenment era, according to Denise Ferreira da Silva, black women exemplarily figure as a "disorderly array," embodying a "double affectability . . . a dangerously unproductive will."[33] As such, an imagined disarray fictionally, and terribly, renders black women ideal candidates for post-Enlightenment settlement and theft in the form of everything from the Moynihan report to the forced sterilizations in North Carolina. Such efforts in settling and harvesting black female desire are ultimately the conditions for white, heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist subjectivity to reassert itself as a priori self-possessed and already managed/managerial.

Not only does Mutu enact a resistant disaggregative aesthetic of antisettlement and anticomposure but she elucidates the particular colonialist strategies whereby the settlement of space is contingent on the settlement of bodies. Such criticism emerges most powerfully in *Le Noble Savage* (2006), wherein Mutu queries the role that the fiction of the "noble savage" has played in corporeal and ecological management, along with their dis/figuration as poachable bounty. Although the particular locale for this print is never named, the specters of "Africa" and "Kenya"

30. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.
31. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 150.
32. Tiffany Jeanette King, "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 98.
33. Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race,* 150.

amble. As with the black female subject in post-Enlightenment, "Africa," too, emerges as an unsettled and ideal space for others' settlement and reckless harvesting. As Paulla Ebron writes, "Africa is that primordial place where one can transcend the confines of a constricted life in the North."[34]

Le Noble Savage theorizes this nexus of bodily and earthly settlement as well as the role fundamentally unharvestable black female-ishness plays in antisettlement. In this way, there are two levels of critique at work in the collage. On the one hand, an argument about "Africa" and "Kenya" as settlable depends on the construction of the noble savage as a racialized, sexualized figure who, as with all harvests, yields. On the other hand, the spirit of the ignoble savage, of Mau Mau and other assorted unsettlables, lingers in and as "bodies . . . wracked with the wounds of war [that] keep on despite missing or twisted limbs."[35] These are bodies that are unsettled for refusing to settle, their flesh bearing the mark of this transgression. In Mutu's life-world, though, this unsettlement makes life out of the cut and puncture, engendering another kind of bounty, apart from visible flesh and soil.

Le Noble Savage consists of a solitary dis/figure kneeling while holding a palm tree. The lower half of the Mylar canvas is a wash of charcoal black and peach-pink wriggly lines while the upper half is a fluorescent pink, maroon sunburst. The dis/figure, an errant de/composition of color, texture, and image, seemingly inhabits a natural-ish topos; the lines suggestive of an unruly brush and the bright pink an inhospitably hot climate. The dis/figure's own corpus seems to emerge directly out of the lines and the light, consistent with the noble savage's envied yet pathologized imbrication with a deregulated nature. This imbrication with nature or natural process is perhaps also at work in Mutu's disfiguration of this being's flesh. "A neo-psychedelic" arrangement of dark purples, pinks, and browns swirls together, and the puddle of flesh is adorned with several magazine clippings of animal heads and floral

34. Paulla Ebron, "Traffic in Men," in *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, ed. Maria Grosz-Ngate and Omari H. Kokole (London: Routledge, 1997), 240.
35. Mutu, "The Power of Earth."

arrangements.[36] In some ways, Mutu visualizes a racialized and sexualized notion of natural bounty, given as animal, plant, and para/human life. Indeed, according to Carolyn Shaw, "The idea of the noble savage grew with the notion of nature as good and beneficent, with natural law."[37] At its heart, then, the Enlightenment construction of the noble savage depended on a "safe kind of romanticism"; the dual idealization of the unenlightened and nature predicated on their mutual, fictitious openness to endless acts of emotional and ecological theft.[38]

But *Le Noble Savage* on Mutu's canvas, and the nature that it purportedly embodies, is not yielding anything at all. In fact, this artwork actively withholds, subverting the racial, sexual, and ontological hierarchies that make possible the taxonomic categories of "noble" and "ignoble" savage in the first place. At once, following Monique Allawaert, the "noble" and "ignoble" savages are exemplary "parahumans" in the particular way they are "analogically" tied to nature and, as such, subjected to the violent harvesting whims of hungry humans.[39] But, again as Allawaert argues, the analogical relation also casts humans and parahumans alongside one another; allowing for the noble savage to actively challenge the ontological superiority of the human to other life forms. Moreover, unlike its promiscuous colonial figuration, the parahuman's interstiality is not the sign of its fixity and availability but of its hypermobility. In Mutu's *Le Noble Savage*, nature isn't embodied but let loose, curling around and into visibility, morphing from heads of flowers to lions, roaming back into invisibility as images burst into lively arrangements of color and pattern. More precisely, while the heads of lions may appear on the shoulder of the dis/figure, the rest of their bodies move behind paint and ink into undisclosed dimensions, their roaming no longer within a harvestable range. Similarly, the female-ish corpus of the noble savage moves into and out of the "ish," underneath and around flora and fauna, the errant lines of color and glimmer of Mylar. Taxonomy imploded.

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36. Michael Veal, "Enter Cautiously," in *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise*, ed. Douglas Singleton (Bologna: Damiani, 2008), 3.
37. Carolyn Martin Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 189.
38. Ibid.
39. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*, 98.

Mightily, this implosion moves as torn image and swirling paint. In addition to the ontological multiplicities that flow through her work, the dis/figure's surfaces are also painted in a kind of irresolvable fashion. That is, to repeat, there is a liquidity in Mutu's work. In *Le Noble Savage* this manifests, as in other works, as a kind of beautifully blotchy dis/array of colors, semi-approximating tie-dye but way better. For example, star bursts and storm clouds of red-orange, off-white, and violet-blue rumble up and down the arm and upper thighs of the dis/figure. A brown and pearl checkered pattern ripples like armor from neck to belly. There is a thunderous activity to the flesh that hides it.

Powerfully, then, as a series of rumblings, gatherings, and hidings, *Le Noble Savage* embraces a highly mobile interstitial parahuman relation with nature; the dis/figure, in becoming and devolving as super/natural process, subverts the stilling acts at the heart of post/colonial, racial, and sexual taxonomical projects. Along with the unconservable partial animals that in/visibly roam in the piece, *Le Noble Savage* also surreptitiously moves out of a harvestable range. Again, this is done through Mutu's essentially unharvestable harvests. Mutu's irreverent arrangement of partial forms and color allow for the fullness of life to move in radically undetectable ways. Mutu's disidentificatory disturbance of the taxonomizing and ontologizing work essential to the production of the noble savage unleashes their purportedly more savage counterpart, the ignoble savage. That is, unlike the noble savage, the ignoble savage is characterized by their uncontainability, their purported brutality and lawlessness.[40] In Mutu's *Le Noble Savage*, the ignoble moves not only in and as a kind of willful disaggregation (a resistance to external order) but through the assertion of snakes that amble around the dis/figure's head.

More precisely, jutting out of the left and right sides of the dis/figure's head, twisting down the side of their disem/body, are snakes of light greens and blues. The snakes' relationship to the ig/noble savage is complex. When I initially looked at this piece, I didn't anticipate the emergence of an ignoble savage; in fact, the snakes themselves suggested rather a corrupted Edenic scene. Here, we might think of Africa less as an idealized, Edenic topos than of an endlessly intruded site with

40. See Christer Lindberg, "The Noble and Ignoble Savage," *Ethnoscripts Jahrgang* 15, no. 1 (2013), https://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de/forschung/publikationen/ethnoscripts/es-15-1/es-15-1-lindberg.pdf.

colonialism-as-snake trespassing to introduce new relations to pain and mortality. At the same time, however, the snake's approximation to hair suggests the presence of Medusa. Her evocation here is instructive insofar as she has been historically tied to Africa, Libya particularly. Perhaps, then, it is precisely the serpent in the Garden of Eden that becomes transposed and multiplied into the snakes that transform the noble savage into their counterpart. This doubledness at once evokes colonialism's complicity in the production of the ig/noble savage while suggesting that not only does the ig/noble savage return the gaze but does so in intentionally racialized and gendered (Medusa is undoubtedly female-ish) ways that actively turns self-same Enlightenment *man* to stone.

Moreover, the ig/noble savage figures prominently in British colonial discourse on Kenya, exemplarily as the Mau Mau. In her meditations on land in the essay "The Power of Earth in My Work," Mutu writes,

> In the 1950s, the British forced most of the Gikuyu people out of their homes and interned them in labor camps, barbed-wire villages and prisons. The British conducted "screenings" in order to determine the extent of the people's sympathies with resistance fighters, which amounted to torture in the form of castration, sodomy and amputations.[41]

The resistance fighters, or the Mau Mau, sought to recover land from British control and because of the "brutality" of their activism, they endured the inscription as ignoble.

As mentioned previously, Kenya has suffered a long history of British land expropriation and colonial occupation. In response, during the 1950s, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, or Mau Mau, emerged and initiated a variety of land recovery strategies, including "scare tactics, attacking whole families including farm animals and leaving a death charm for the other British households to see and fear."[42] As a result, the colonial government declared a state of emergency on October 20, 1952, and enacted a military policy that resulted in mass round-ups of Kikuyu peoples and a series of screenings for radicalism.

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41. Mutu, "The Power of Earth."
42. Ibid.

Terribly, as Mutu laments, such screenings were accompanied by physical and psychological violence. Unsettlings to police the unsettlement. Unsettlings that later took the form of resettlement; according to Caroline Elkins, "Mau Mau" soon figured as a psychiatric disease to be cured. In that way, resettlement was framed in the rhetoric of enlightenment, measurable in the formerly insane/convulsive/revolutionary's commitment to "physical labor, craft training, recreation, and civic and moral re-education."[43] What is more, such resettlement assumed a gendered form, with the emergence of women's clubs, teaching "domestic science as conceived by European community development workers" as a device for rehabilitating Mau Mau women.[44]

While the history of re/settlement is neither explicitly named nor visualized in Mutu's *Le Noble Savage*, an aesthetic of antisettlement irreverently blooms on and against the canvas. By aligning such antisettlement and noncomposure with a female-ish dis/figure bearing the name *Le Noble Savage*, Mutu undoes a series of managements — colonial, racial, gender, and sexual — essential to the reliability of the work's very name. What is more, Mutu elucidates catachresis's own promiscuity, the particular way it never really settles the bodies and landscapes to which it is attached, never ensuring that either will yield the harvests they are said to announce and authorize.

Indeed, by way of a certain liquidity alongside the antitaxonomical irreverence of collage, life moves in inapproximable ways. Blackness meets pearl meets whiteness meets glitter meets high heel meets decapitated tiger. This is a gathering that bespeaks no name. This is a gathering that suggests undisclosed ambulation. This is not decapitation but queer and crip fugitivity. Black female-ishness is said to move or, more nearly, be gravitated toward, but the shape and sway of this ontological figuration collapses in on its own name. The locatability of the black and female drifts into the anticaptive, aesthetic dimensions of the "ish," the places where form and figure collide; ink, paint, and glitter volcanically spray, the canvas folds and roundups fail.

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43. Caroline Elkins, "The Struggle for Mau Mau Rehabilitation in Late Colonial Kenya," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 1 (2000): 39.
44. Daniel Branch, "The Enemy Within: Loyalists and the War Against Mau Mau in Kenya," *Journal of African History* 48, no. 2 (2007): 310.

Part of what Mutu's aesthetic innovations engender is an elucidation and refashioning of harvests. Indeed, something is made, something elusively black, something elusively female. At the same time, as Mutu brilliantly philosophizes, the something pulls in and against the black and the female, upsetting taxonomical and, arguably, spatiotemporal certitude; fissures, ruptures, new textures that coalesce in and as figural dispersal. What is more, such figural dispersal doesn't just take place in her installations and collage; her filmic work also enacts an innovation in presence that forestalls any external attempt at rounding up.

In a seven-minute film short, titled *Amazing Grace* (2005), Mutu sings the hymn in her native Kikuyu language while walking along a beach. She eventually walks into the ocean, the song still booming in the background, and the piece ends with Mutu floating on the crest of a wave. The curator elaborates the piece's relationship to antislavery, in particular through its use of song and the artist's embrace of the sea, arguing that Mutu's "submerge[ence] in the water . . . consummates a psychic reconnection to African roots and culture," refiguring the ocean from engine of violation to baptismal scene of self-recovery.[45] While this analysis is important, I'm wondering if there isn't another modality of black female resistance at work in the grainy, layered flow of the film itself.

As I argued earlier, Mutu's dis/figures tend to bear a liquid kind of flesh. Whereas the flesh of *Le Noble Savage* is a kind of tie-dyed, kaleidoscoped arrangement of dark blues, purples, pinks, and browns, many of Mutu's other disfigures appear to shimmer with drops of pearl. Combinations of white/pearl spray paint and ink create the illusion of iridescent skin and, in some cases, a frayed, sequined ball gown. In *Amazing Grace*, Mutu walks along the beach in a white dress. The grainy quality of the film in conjunction with sunlight both work to break up her body and dress. Moreover, the layering of shots, the walking body and the sea, enacts a moving disfiguration. Blotches of bright pearl and warm blues open onto her walking form, threatening to dissolve body and dress in a wash of light and burnt film. It was at that moment that I wondered whether the brilliant disintegration of flesh and fabric achieved the "Amazing Grace" promised in the song. In other words, through

45. Trevor Schoonmaker, "A Fantastic Journey," in *A Fantastic Journey*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 23–26.

rips and tears in media, not only does Mutu's art resist visibility but it messes with spatiotemporal logics aimed at her/their capture. If her form cannot be wedded to the constraints of this world, it might achieve the sparkling grace found only when the frame is broken, the page is cut, the body becomes light.

This is not to say that something like black female-ish anticaptivity only becomes possible through its absorption into spectacular bright whiteness, but that other portals toward freedom coalesce when images are disturbed—when form is cut and repasted. In some ways, the breaking apart of film enacts the moving form of Mutu as collage herself. Patchworks of bright whites, yellows, and blues, shades of black, the unarrestable sequence of color that moves with light itself, intersects with her skin and dress. What is more, there is a fundamental unharvestability at the heart of this gathering. The burning of the film that engenders this very kaleidoscoped, female-ish form also hides it; in that way, in this particular life-world, Mutu herself can move on the beach without fear of getting gathered up without her consent. So too, given the ecological ethos of her art, there might be other privately understood communions with the sand and the sea, forms of liveliness that join hands with her singing self and the light. In the end, Mutu dis/appears into a range of color and texture, sound and image, ocean and beach.

The film funnels, a slow burn dissolves the image into dancing dots.

Maybe therein is where grace's sweet sounds lie.

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