Counts would not acknowledge Millie Wilson, Nayare Soledad, Francesc Ruiz and Che Gossett 09.05.22 Juf

Millie Wilson Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)



She was a woman. She dressed as a man. She was authoritative and uncompromising. She was romantic and domestic. She was born working class. She was acclaimed in stylish circles. She became famous. She withdrew from the public. She was a mannish renegade. She wanted to marry the love of her life. She was a flawless technician. She neglected to paint for years at a time. She risked everything to be an artist. She gave up her art for love. She flaunted her sexuality. She accepted various inversion theories. She was scornful of art schools. She was generous in her support of genuine talent. She was a misfit. She continually sought to be recognized. She was dangerous in her intentions. She was a favorite of the wives of distinguished men. She longed for nature. She could live only in the city. She wanted autonomy. She was haunted by family ties. She generated excitement. She secretly wished for tranquility. She was flagrantly promiscuous. She insisted on integrity in the most mundane transactions. She worked very quickly. She painted with exquisite precision. She had a reckless temper and was arrogant. She was deeply moved by the plight of the unfortunate.

She was a disaffected expatriate. She found that certain neighborhoods allowed for refuge in unconventional salons. She was subject to the anxiety that her alienation from art history instilled. She was engaged by the central debates of the period. She was concerned with the invention of a lesbian aesthetic. She was irrelevant to the male avant-garde's nostalgia for the women of antiquity. She endured a loneliness particular to those erased from history. She devised aesthetic strategies grounded in mutuality. She could never match the devasting wit of the intelligentsia. She displayed on occasion the gift of retort. She was described by male critics as the heroine of modernism. She was all but absent from the accounts of the period. She espoused the rhetoric of collectivity. She demanded that each of her lovers be all things to her. She escaped abroad to anonymous adventures. She longed for delight in love and the perfect union. She was the target of sexual speculation. She did not resemble case studies of the consequences of unnatural attachments. She was accused by her male contemporaries of displaying a morbid desire. She found the counts of law would not acknowledge the existence of a desire like hers.













### The Theoretical Closet: All But the Obvious (1990)

### The Theoretical Closet

Due in part to the virtual absence of the lesbian in feminist and postmodern theory, I devised a retrospective exhibition for a fictitious lesbian artist

and called it "Peter (A Young English Girl)." The reference is a portrait of the lesbian painter Gluck by the lesbian painter Romaine Brooks. The show included a deliberately aggrandizing photo blow-up of me, crossdressed as a turn-of-the-century artist/dandy. The show invoked Left Bank lesbians of early modernism, issues of cross-dressing, exoticism, the foibles of history and theory, and the intertwined pathologizing of sexual deviance and race. The following were comments in response to that work. Everyone

quoted is more or less an avid reader of postmodernist discourse. Most are engaged with theories of feminism, though many straight feminist friends and colleagues whose practices are informed by gender made no comment at all.

Straight feminist art historian Someone really should theorize the lesbian gaze.

Straight feminist friend You did it so tastefully. No one was offended.

FIFTEEN

Millie

Wilson

**Lesbian feminist stranger** I was totally outraged and insulted by the title "A Young English Girl." She was clearly an adult woman.

Closeted lesbian dealer No one is as interested in this as you are. There are no collectors for this work. Isn't there something else in your life to make art about?

Straight male critic It was great. No, I didn't write about it.

Straight male stranger It was well done. There was no bitter aftertaste.

Straight male artist Last year I invented a lesbian artist and painted all her works for her.

Straight feminist artist When I first saw that photograph of you, I thought it was a mistake.

Gay male editor That's all very well, but what does your work have to offer gay men?

Another straight feminist I've been writing the story of an art historian nineteenth-century lesbian artist. You stole my idea.

millie wilson is currently producing <u>the museum of lesbian dreams</u>. She lives in los angeles and directs the program in art at calarts. © 1990, millie wilson.

HOUT

## Nayare Soledad I remember kissing you, and I would do it again

Yes I remember how I got to that mouth. I had just had my hair lightened, as soon as I entered I had wished for her, all carefree and with make-up, to do my hair. She smiled at me, she picked my seat and let a guy take care of me. In the second rinse she participated, she added a softener that smelled like pisco with a lot of lemon. The foam grew like meringue and instead of scared I felt relieved, caressed. I stood up and asked for water. There appeared a beautiful brown skin joined to white heels, worn out and radiant. A finger with a sharp nail pointed at me and then at her. I followed her, and I ended up holding her hand, like when you cross the club with your friend guiding you to the bathroom. Only foam, pisco and lemon. Biting the clouds must taste like this, I started to wonder what it would feel like to be bitten by my new friend.

Sometimes you don't need to talk, but you always need music. That's all she said. She got closer to the bubble bluer than the others and whispered to it. Absurd.

To the point. Together.

123 beats per second. Pomps vibrate, our pom pom ps. I didn't think I was going to dance today. I didn't think I was going to tell you that I'd be going. I thought you were an island but you are a mountain, I'm not surprised that you understand me (that you throw light on me), that angels fly around you armed with a thick and saliva. Bitter angels. They kiss me. They guard your flesh because love has no frontiers but these lips know the pain of those that kiss without desire. I really like you. You embody, Giuseppe, in a tit without milk, in a keta pastiche. A pleasure, Campuzano. I don't choose what is healthy either, I'll heal through the anus.

In order not to miss the rhythm of my new hairstyle, I get out of the hair salon and I remember the path I have trodden. Stepped past. The past haunts me and I love to be haunted. The past also chases her. We bumped into each other, we were going slowly but still. Our pasts collide. She is a discontinuous line, and I am a doodle made with a pen without ink. Now the alley is covered with memories that I don't know if they are mines or hers. We pick them up together and I see that some of mine are similar in color to yours. Douchebags. Fists. Scratches, trickeries, cooing. We take a break and you tell me that in the north there is also a south, and I tell you that thistles are also flowers. Our pasts begin to spin, they remember a time in which they were not possible, they tell us about it, they sing it to us. We don't listen, we look at each other, your mouth runs but your eyes try to cover everything, they want to see even behind themselves, my eyes are in my mouth and want to see further in, you say there is Veneno, I believe you. What else spits out that deep intense throat, full with desires that never found their way back home? Full, wet, oily lips. I give you a word and a wish. And it's night time now and I'm late, but you're invited to come visit my mountain, it's not very high but you can see new stars every night. If you never come, blessings, and may el Veneno flow to all the corners.

You never come. I arrive, and stay, I lay down. July 7 in the park of the 7 tits. It's one of those warm and cool nights. I lay down and the stars appear, the more you scan the sky with your eyes the more they appear, they tighten the space, they fill the new moon, they renew the

water that floats above us. All tits point to a star, and the ones in this park point to a constellation that I've always seen in dreams and today I'll finally see in person. From looking up so much, the stars decided to come down, the rain began, a few drops that land like sweat, it's like receiving the tears of a loved one. To one side appears a body, which is a better pillow than grass, I caress it and it's hairy, soft hair, a body that trembles that roars. What I want is for you to eat me, tiger, to stick out your tongue and let me parade through it, pose in each fang, that you pull the trigger, light another, see your face in the sky, see a sky in your face.

More than a kiss it's a prayer. Choque Chinchay, you are my favorite constellation, cosita.

Just one kiss from me will be enough to heal you, just one kiss from you will suffice to avenge me.

# Francesc Ruiz

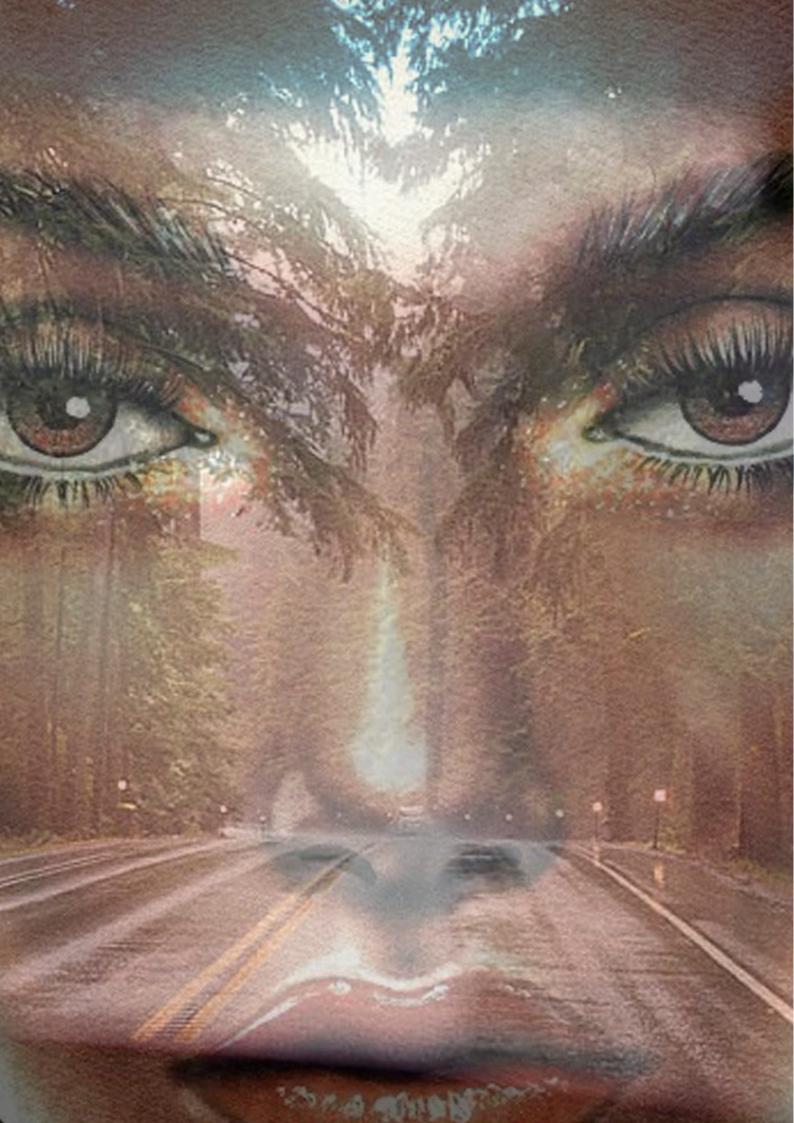








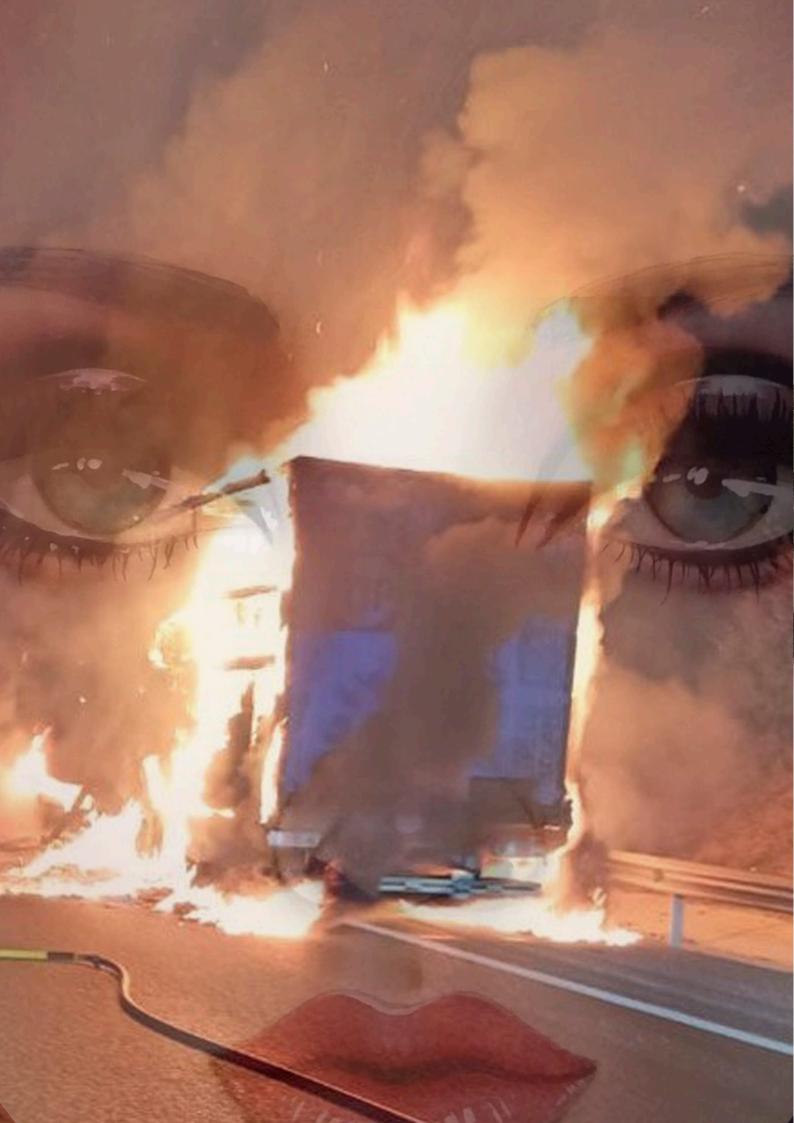




















# Che Gossett The Dark Sublime: Blackness, the Oceanic and the Unorientable Archive

The sea is an ecological archive of slavery. The sea is vertigo inducing. Vertigo traces back to the Latin for the dizzying sensation of whirling, the loss of anchoring coordinates and the dispossession that accompanies the slow or rapid decomposition and evaporation of the sense of stable orientation. It is this sense of vertigo that Glissant describes in "The Open Boat," the first chapter of *Poetics of Relation* (University of Minnesota, 1990). In this contribution, titled "The Dark Sublime" I examine media installations by British and Ethiopian media artist Theo Eshetu and Black British filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah to consider how oceanic indexes the temporal and spatial fluidity of racial slavery's ontological, financial-capitalist and ecological afterlife. Abolitionist then, entails the dismantling of the modern grammar of the racial as a grammar of captivity and this requires not only the end of the genre of Man but the acknowledgement of entanglement beyond the human, which Akomfrah's concept of affective proximity brings into view.

The vertigo that accompanies the "dizzying sky plastered to the waves" is a meta-physical undoing and dis-orientation<sup>1</sup>. The slave ship is a deportation machine, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the greatest forced migration in world history. Who was deported?

African aristocrats were not only complicit in the trade but protected from it. Now, what do we call the people this royalty helped track and capture and trade from their hinterlands, margins, and among their "subjects"? Those people were indigenous, displaced in the most brutal way by European sociopathic greed with the aid of African kings and queens and aristocrats. In other words, from the beginning, indigeneity and class are given in the Africans who suffered Middle Passage...<sup>2</sup>

The African aristocrats however were neither protected from nor could anticipate colonialism's dispossession of their aristocratic station and the recursive violence of ideological anti-blackness and racial capitalism that would fold back onto the continent the near future and in our historical present.

Glissant differentiates the experience and ontological condition of the exile from that of the enslaved. "Exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue. The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas<sup>3</sup>." The 'deterioration of the person' is one of the signatures of racial slavery, the slave ship and its technologies of torture and the hold, designed to both extinguish the coordinates of personhood of the enslaved and to affirm the sovereignty of the category of the person as the exclusive property of whiteness. The negative horizon of racial slavery was the violent reduction of the figure of person to "flesh" that which as Spiller's argues was available to anyone (any white/person). What exactly is flesh? To parse out the political vernacular: flesh shares an anatomical imaginary with cadaver (the etymology tracing to fallenness) but deno-

Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 5

Yollotl Gómez Alvarado et al., "Conversación Los Abajocomunes," *The New Inquiry*, September 5, 2018, accessed February 22, 2021, https://thenewinquiry.com/conversacion-los-abajocomunes/. (Alvarado, et al. 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Glissant, Poetics of Relation, p. 5

tes sensation, perhaps overwhelming sensation. Flesh is the sphere of the living, the cadaver is the sphere of the dead. The skin is subtended by flesh yet flesh is what is exposed when the skin is cut, riven, or to use Spillers description "ripped apart."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps one name for da Silva's ethics of inseparable difference is flesh. For Spillers the body is a liberated subject position and the flesh the "zero degree of social conceptualization," a captive position. Flesh is sentient but not intelligent. Flesh has no narrative. Flesh seeks to mark that which is marked, that which is exposed, vulnerable, wounded and lacerated, torn apart. Flesh, unlike sentience, figures purely as a sensory receptacle for violence. Yet flesh is also – as that zero degree – what precedes, resists and exceeds meta/physical enclosure as body possession. If the body = liberated and flesh = captive formula is turned over, then flesh becomes a critique of the body as a grammar of capture. Flesh then is shared life. A certain "shareable darkness" as David Marriott might term it<sup>5</sup>. In *Beloved* (Vintage, 2004) first published in 1987, the recognized start of the AIDS epidemic, Toni Morrison poses an ethical call to love the flesh.<sup>6</sup>

The slave ship in its hellish apparatus figures for Glissant as a void and yet the void is not? the nothingness of the negative vortex but rather an ontology of capture that is deconstructive (generative as opposed to destructive) in its gratuitous violence. "Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss..." Similar to Spillers in her version of the hold of the ship as a reformulation of the Freudian oceanic, and to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetics of the hold as limbo – which in the theological sense marks the atopic space and suspended temporality of purgatory – the hold for Glissant is a 'nonworld.' What is a non-world<sup>8</sup>? The grammar of capture, here of the hold, even as it is an entirely different politics and poetics, here of the Black radical poetic and literary tradition, still fails to adequately account for and communicate that which it aims to describe. In the midst of torture, the voice, words and the power of narration – which is seen as one of the central tenets of the human, demarcating the human from the category of the animal which has sounds but not logos and reasoned speech – fail to register, the voice fails as a register and instead language fractures and decomposes into haunting screams, moans and cries. The slave ship is an ontological enterprise for the negation of personhood, a space of oblivion wherein being is bracketed. For Glissant, the ocean is part of the ecology of anti-blackness and racial slavery.

Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easier just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands... In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green<sup>9</sup>.

Here the sea is in fact in vertigo, flipped upside down, there's an inversion from the terres-

- 4 Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 206
- 5 David Marriott, *Haunted life: Visual culture and Black modernity.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), xixx.
- 6 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), p. 103
- 7 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, p. 5
- 8 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, p. 5
- 9 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, p. 5

trial to the oceanic topology, the optics move from earthly to subterranean. The signposts are underwater, a submerged route that lies beneath the "human" world and haunts it. The human world is the early world, which is why the oceanic world is often experienced as so foreign. The human is etymologically of the earth as well, one of the biological tenets and registers of man as an anthropological being is evolutionarily bipedalism (an attribute rooted in the distinction of human from animal which in its ableism bifurcates between the trope of the naturalized human body its animal and disabled/crip other). The human is shadowed by its Latinate root, humus, for ground or earth/soil. The ocean is the afterlife of slavery and racial capitalism.

Vertigo Sea by John Akomfrah thinks through (as an active process) Black aesthetics and affect. John Akomfrah activates a Black affective and aesthetic charge within the potentiality of the sublime. Vertigo Sea generates affect through a cinematic sensorium, the use of a triad of large screens that overwhelm the viewer but also force a visual conversation that doesn't feel disjunctive or dissonant given the dramatic size and difficulty of looking at three screens at once, instead it feels as though there is a synchronicity between seemingly disparate imagery. "It seemed to me very early on that if the form we choose is the multi-screen form, then we are also saying, by implication that we want something discursive, we want something multi-faceted, and we want them to talk to each other in some way."10 This is intentional on the part of Akomfrah, who originally created the film to speak to the current crisis of displacement -- dubbed the "refugee crisis -- but then came to the realization and resolve that this narrative as opposed to being singular, exceptional or isolatable, was instead, entangled. Ecology traces to the Greek word for "home" – oikos. The slaves of ancient Greece, oiketes (sub)tended the home, were its condition of domestic possibility. Blackness performs dissection of the modern subject, as Saidiya Hartman traces in Scenes of Subjection (Oxford University Press, 1997): "The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body."11

Theo Eshetu's *The Slave Ship* (2015) is concerned with the way in which the world as earthly residence is unhoused and haunted by racial slavery. The slave is the Gordian knot that binds together the dimensions of world as a grammar of capture. Abolition is the project of disarticulation. His visual portals dramatize slavery as an ecological force upon the earth through a mode of visual distortion. Creating a kind of visual vortex, the viewer thinks they are looking at rather serene oceanic life and yet are confronted with the trick of the aperture that Eshetu creates – a vestibule through which the spectator is forced to grapple with the racial violence of worlding. The image in the portal is redoubled, mirrored, time is therefore folded in on itself. What is the difference between a temporal fold and temporal collapse? Where does the fold begin and the collapse end and vice versa? Not a geometric fold but a fold of temporal fabric, or even a wave as a fold. The objects – animate and inanimate – fold into each other, they cascade and disappear in the horizon that splits the middle of the screen, creating a vanishing point in the midst of the center. This horizon might be reminiscent of and index the oceanic horizon. Eshetu pulls from literature, art, myth and theater –

Jeffrey Freymann, "The Beauty and Dangers of 'Vertigo Sea'," *KFDC* May 12, 2018, accessed February 22, 2021 https://www.kdfc.com/culture/the-state-of-the-arts/beauty-dangers-vertigo-sea/

Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 62

Richard Wagner's 1843 opera *The Flying Dutchman*<sup>12</sup>, with its crew of specters sentenced to sail the sea forever and Drexciya, after the fable of and African underwater necropolis, a myth generated out of the history of African suicide by drowning following survival of the Middle Passage. Death as refusal of enslavement. These mythic stories speak to slavery's hauntology, how its legacy ghosts the ports of the metropole, such as Hamburg where the footage was taken which was a major slave trading port. Germany is haunted by the ongoing afterlife of slavery and Eshetu turns the putative natural world into a scene of confrontation with the archive of slavery.

"It's this conversation amongst kindred spirits without necessarily having the geographical proximity. It is a kind of affective proximity at play..."

14 John Akomfrah

While there are different locations and sites for Eshetu and Akomfrah's films, both are concerned with the ocean, its ontology and its sublime power. There are also overlaps in the aesthetic objects and archives that both artists assemble in their respective installations. Both Eshetu and Akomfrah reference the famous daguerreotype of an enslaved man, Renty Taylor, who's visual profile and portrait has circulated and is hypervisible while simultaneously his personhood and story is largely unknown to the public. Renty's descendants are now suing Harvard University for profiting off the photographs of him – which are the earliest daquerreotypes of enslaved people and were commissioned by biologist and Harvard professor Louis Agassiz in 1850. Harvard refuses to relinquish them to the family of the enslaved. When enslaved people were first freed, dispossessed, they didn't own property or rights to imagery and a member of the Taylor family recently observed that "169 years later, Harvard is telling Renty's descendant he still does not own his image — he still is a slave."15 The other shared visual is J.M.W. Turner's 1840 rendering of the 1781 Zong massacre. The shared imagery points to shared Black aesthetic intimacy. This Black aesthetic intimacy denotes the affective attachments and cultural traditions that persist across the racial capitalist and colonial violences of displacement – the deportation and incarceration of racial slavery – that created the Black diaspora.

So how does one find a way to talk about the Vietnamese drowning at sea in their thousands in the [19]70s with political prisoners being dumped at sea by both the French in Algeria and the militant junta in Argentina? Once you start to connect those things, you begin to think that if a politics of identity as opposed to 'identity politics' has any value then surely at some point it might be important to dwell on the question of sentience itself as a kind of register. <sup>16</sup>– John Akomfrah

Akomfrah's project is not about locating and confirming, as though through a process of

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Maddison, Mike Ashman, John McMurry, *Flying Dutchman – an opera in three acts by Richard Wagner* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

Studies and articles on Drexciya mention various collective drowning suicides by African enslaved people as the origin for the myth. One recent being: Mick Harvey, "Harnessed the Storm—Rereading Drexciya with The Black Atlantic." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2020): pp. 136-140

Anthony Bogues and John Akomfrah, "The Black Intellectual in the African Diaspora: The Example of Stuart Hall," *Callaloo* 40, no. 1 (2017): p. 87

Mara Reinstein and Susan Svrluga, "Harvard Accused in Lawsuit of Retaining and Profiting from Images of Slaves," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 21, 2019), accessed February 22, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/03/20/harvard-accused-lawsuit-seizing-profiting-images-slaves/

Erik Morse, "The Oceanic Ecologies of John Akomfrah," ArtReview, March 4, 2016, accessed February 22, 2021, https://artreview.com/jan-feb-2016-feature-john-akomfrah/

scientific or forensic or epistemic veracity that might resist erasure and falsification, identity formations across historical iterations. Rather, Akomfrah is thinking identity in a more liquid form through an oceanic ontological register. Akomfrah is arguing for an entanglement of the past and the present, as opposed to their asynchronicity and the racial liberal teleology splitting of the two as though they were incommensurable and needed to be resolved, governed and put into sequential order through the linear frame of historical progress. In the contemporary epoch of climate collapse and rising sea levels and the hyper-militarization of borders, the affective atmospherics of coloniality and anti-blackness and racial capitalism impinge ever more forcefully on the finite life of not only humans and (other) animals but also, ultimately, imperiling the sustainability of the planet. What is the relationship between the Vietnamese drowning at sea and political prisoners being dumped at sea by the French in Algeria and military juntas in Argentina? Another way of posing this question might to inquire what the relationship is between the philosophy of history and the concept of the event? What are the affective entanglements between these seemingly disparate and discrete events and historical moments? Akomfrah's conceptualization of affective proximity resists the figuration of identity as a fixed and stable category and instead proposes a form of connectivity beyond a hierarchical taxonomy and typology of life forms, opting for the plasticity of sentience.

Millie Wilson is an artist who has exhibited work in the United States and abroad. Her practice utilizes the frame of the museum to propose a secret history of modernity informed by queer sexuality, femininity, race, and class. Her work has been presented in numerous exhibitions, including *All but the Obvious* (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1990); *Bad Girls* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994); *In a Different Light* (Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1995); *Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art and Fashion* (Hayward Gallery, London, 1998); and *Whiteness, A Wayward Construction* (Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA, 2003), among others. She is represented in numerous museum collections, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, CA; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; and Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, NY. She has received numerous grants for her work, including awards from the California Arts Council, City of Los Angeles, National Endowment for the Arts, and Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Wilson's writing has been published in a variety of contexts and she has taught and lectured throughout the United States and Europe. She was on faculty in the Program of Art at the California Institute of the Arts from 1985 to 2014.

Nayare Soledad is a poet, DJ, salaried driver, curator and healer. Crooked, stubborn and romantic transvestite. She had an artistic residency at Matadero Madrid in 2020/2021 and recently she has self-published her poems *Bendiciones travestis y algunas maldiciones*.

Francesc Ruiz (Barcelona, 1971) work departs from comics as an aesthetic, narrative and intellectual substratum, and as an historical and operational material. Applying it as a container or description of reality (through creation, alteration, restitution or assembly, among other ways) generating possible stories that reveal the gears through which individual and social identities are built, sexual identity or even the city's identity. He alternates individual artistic practice with other collective projects such as the experimental curatorial team CREATURES (together with Amanda Cuesta, Maribel López and Glòria Pou), the Grupo de Dibujo Radical (together with Efrén Álvarez), the feminist and queer fanzine PIPA (together with Maite Garbayo, ferranElOtro and Roger Adam) or more recently the Instituto de Estudios del Porno [Institute of Porn Studies], together with Ona Bros and Lucía Egaña.

Che Gossett is the racial justice postdoctoral fellow at Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, Columbia University and Law School.

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The images on pages 1–6 are from Millie Wilson's installation *Fauve Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl)*, first presented at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) in 1989. All images are courtesy of the artist.

The text on page 7 appeared in the catalogue for *All but the Obvious* (1990), edited by Pam Gregg and Catherine Lord and designed by Susan Silton for LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions).

#### **Translations**

Translation of Nayare Soledad's text to English: Beatriz Ortega Botas