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**Grounds** is the new research journal from the Sint Lucas Antwerp Research Group (SLARG). It builds on the legacy of *TYPP*, offering a broad perspective on artistic research. The name reflects the different 'grounds' of inquiry — material, conceptual, and beyond. Rather than presenting finished results, *Grounds* highlights artistic research as an evolving process, fostering exchange and new perspectives.



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# Grounds

SLARG Research Publication

# Grounds

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I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this  
 — *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2.

We are very excited to present our very first issue of *Grounds*, the journal of the Sint Lucas Antwerpen Research Group (SLARG). *Grounds* is the successor to *TYPP*, the SLARG magazine that was founded in 2014. It will be published once a year, in both a printed and a digital version, and will feature both written and non-textual contributions. *Grounds* relates SLARG research projects, deliberately deviating from a monographic, accumulative reporting strategy. Every issue will contain contributions from different researchers and will have a varying format and graphic design approach. With this new name, we seek to detach ourselves from the explicit association between *TYPP* and the word *typography*. Ten years after its first publication, the name change also comes in response to a fundamental re-evaluation of the purpose and function of a research journal. With *Grounds*, we intend to put even more emphasis on sharing the research being done by SLARG. Each publication is carefully constructed and results from an intensive coaching process. This process involves a back and forth of feedback — both individual and collective — from the editorial board, which consists of senior researchers affiliated with SLARG. The main focus in this coaching process is on finding a sharing format that is consistent with the particular stage of the research project in question. Through this iterative process, we hope to challenge the documentation of research as something static and purely retrospective. In doing so, we seek to contribute not only to unlocking the learning potential that lies in exchanging often complex research processes, but equally to cultivate ‘more joyful and fruitful writing processes’ (Lykke et al., 2014, p. 2).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first meaning of the plural noun *grounds* is ‘(t)he particles deposited by a liquid in the bottom of the vessel containing it; dregs, lees. Also *singular*: a residuum, sediment’ (Oxford University Press, 2024, sense I.3.a). It can also be used in a figurative way to refer to any kind of remainder or residue, like coffee grounds, or to other scraps or leftovers, such as wool refuse. A ground can be a literal foundation — ‘solid base or foundation on which an edifice or other structure is raised’ or a figurative one — ‘(t)hat on which a system, work, institution, art, or condition of things, is founded; the basis, foundation’ (II.5.a). Grounds can also be claims or arguments that support our thoughts and actions (‘on the grounds of’). In theology, the Ground with a capital G might, until recently, refer to ‘(t)he divine essence or centre of the individual soul, in which mystic union lies’ (I.1.d). In Early Modern English it could have the now-obsolete meaning of ‘(t)he fundamental constituent or the essential part of any thing’ (II.7). Nowadays it is often used in the arts in a broad sense, as it can allude to both etchings, the underlayer in a composite piece of textile, the basic melody in music or the first coating of colour in a painting (II.6.b). The ground is that which is below or underneath. The bottom or basis of something. In Middle English it could be used in a phrase like the ‘ground of the heart’ (I.1.c) and in contemporary Dutch this usage remains common: *uit de grond van mijn hart*. It touches on matters of reason as well as of the heart. Feeling ‘grounded’ (in Dutch *geaard zijn*) requires an alignment between body, mind and — an anagram of earth — heart.

A ground can moreover be a surface or a piece of land, touching on geopolitical matters of ownership, borders and identity. In *The Garden Against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise* (2024), British author Olivia Laing discusses the picturesque

Stowe Gardens in Buckinghamshire as a token of the eighteenth-century naturalisation and whitewashing of imperialist power imbalances through gardening:

To reshape the land in your own image, to reorder it so that you inhabit the centre and own the view. To fake nature so insidiously that even now those landscapes and the power relations they embody are mistaken for being just the way things are, natural, eternal, blandly reassuring, though what has actually taken place is the seizure of once common ground. (Laing, 2024, p. 82)

Canadian professor of Black studies Katherine McKittrick borrows the term *demonic ground(s)* from Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter to point at the relation between socio-economic constructions and (re-)productions of space. Demonic grounds ‘outline the ways in which (...) place is an unfinished and therefore transformative human geography story’ (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxvi). Research, in this regard, can be seen as a means to uncover common ground, or alternatively, as a (demonic) process of disruption, where it brings forth ‘another—but also transgressive—ground of understanding,’ challenging and deconstructing established notions of space, place and identity, reframing not only *what* we know, but also—and more importantly—*how* we know (Wynter & Scott, 2000, p.164; McKittrick, 2021).

The ground, in the typical outdoor sense, can be hard and solid, but when mixed with water it turns into mud. For American art writer Amelia Groom, to ‘get into the wetness of the ground’ is to slow down and value ‘the ground as a responsive and relational place—a place that receives and remembers things, without striving for vertically erected permanence’ (Groom, 2024). ‘Mud,’ then, with its wet and permeable features, ‘messes with boundaries and categorization and progress. It likes commingling and it likes horizontality.’ Grounds as both solid foundation and slimy mess.

The term *grounds* not only encompasses the land; it also stands for the earth, the soil itself. It is an example of a synecdoche—a figure of speech where a part of something is used to signify the whole. In the same vein, we aim to approach long- as well as short-term research projects via (a collection of) multiple ‘grounds’ or research samples, allowing us to unearth the multiple facets of a research process. As with the ever-doubting character of Hamlet, there is no ultimate ground, only the search for slippery, constantly shifting, ‘more relative’ grounds.

Kim Gorus, editor-in-chief

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## CONTRIBUTORS

### Tundé Adefioye

I am a performing arts dramaturg, writer and lecturer. I co-founded the youth platform Urban Worden (now Trill vzw) in Leuven. In 2016, I began working as 'city dramaturg' in Brussels. I have done dramaturgy for projects including *Malcolm X, (Not) My Paradise* and *Coloured Swan III*. In 2019, I made my directorial debut with the piece *Old Tools > New Masters ≠ New Futures* at Contact Theatre Manchester. Additionally, I am a lecturer at St Lucas Antwerp. At the end of 2020, I was one of the initiators behind the concept that would become Towards Braver Spaces Antwerp.

### Bianca Baldi

In my work, I look at the role of narrative as a means of knowledge production in both fictional and historical contexts. I am particularly interested in the staging of identity and history, and I investigate these themes through my studio practice, which includes photography, film, sculpture and publishing, often combining them in the exhibition format as installations. I obtained my Bachelor of Arts degree in 2007 from the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town, South Africa, and later completed my studies at the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

### Imane B.K.

I collaborate with my colleagues and students to create coaching sessions, workshops and re-learning opportunities at Code Space (Sint Lucas Antwerpen). Alongside Tundé Adefioye, I have conducted research under the banner of Towards Braver Spaces and explored the fostering of collective and sustainable spaces that centre care and well-being in multiple communities. I like to think

about different subjects at the intersections of technology, art and the socio-political sensitivities that arise with my team members at Constant in Brussels.

### Mona Hedayati

I am an artist-researcher and my work draws on computation arts, sound design, posthumanism, affect studies and sensory anthropology. I have a BA in translation studies, an MFA in digital media and a Master of Research in social-political art and design. My research practice encompasses the interdisciplinary field of science, technology and society (STS) to bring 'social thickness' back into the science and technology practices that conventionally claim their home disciplines as immune to social concerns.

### Joud Toamah

I am a graphic designer and artist-researcher from Syria, currently based in Belgium. Themes of remembrance and gestures of repair have been a common thread throughout my work. At the moment, my artistic research centres on water-related traditions along the Euphrates that were passed down generationally as a means to dream and imagine space and social relations in new ways. I participated in residencies at the Frans Masereel Centrum, FUTURES Photography and Morpho. My work has been presented at Photoforum Pasquart, FOMU, Beursschouwburg, Globe Aroma and Constant.

### Robin Vanbesien

I am a Brussels-based artist, filmmaker, researcher and educator. My artistic doctoral project, *Ciné Place-Making* (2018–2024), explores how cinematic methods align with and contribute to situated practices of place-making. How can cinema offer

ways to acknowledge, reclaim, reassemble, rehearse and redistribute the social collective body and sensory imagination of such practices? How do we create a cinema that arises from the reassembly and recreation with assemblers who speak and act in close proximity to these situated practices of place-making? And how can we contribute to the ongoing redistribution of this kind of cinema?

### Pierre-Antoine Vettorello

I am an Afro-European artist-researcher in textiles and clothing at Sint Lucas Antwerp and the University of Antwerp (ARIA). My PhD project, *Black Yarns: Fashion and Resistance of Black Women in the Senegalese Diaspora (1939–1966)*, explores Black resistance through clothing. I have attained an MA in fashion design from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and an MA in Artistic Research from Sint Lucas Antwerp. I have participated in several artistic residencies and am part of the research group Crafting Futures, exploring the transmission of craft traditions in Flanders.

### Viêt Vù (Pham Quang Trung)

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Our editorial board consists of Joachim Ben Yakoub, Kim Gorus, Ward Heirwegh, Ruth Loos, Wesley Meuris, Marnie Slater, Petra Van Brabandt and Tom Viaene.

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# JOUD TOAMAH

## *The Mumkinat of Remembrance*

***Courtyard of Memory* is a one-year research project (2023–2024) on remembrance and water cultures in Syria, specifically along the Euphrates river. In this research, I centre طاسة الرعبة or the fear-soothing bowl. This particular water vessel is the centrepiece in a cultural practice of grief-, sickness- and terror-soothing traditions practiced in the Levant, Egypt and South Asia. My research asks how to remember طاسة الرعبة , the fear-soothing bowl? How can generational practices of personal and communal protection and care be remembered and practiced under conditions of state violence, climate crisis and displacement? How do they transform, how are they read and practiced? My engagement with this bowl comes as a ritual practice, a cultural object, a space of relation and an act of imagining otherwise. Dreaming and (re)remembering emerge as methodologies guiding my research, taking the form of artistic explorations with gathering formats, installations, publications and video work. This research has unfolded into a second year as part of my participation in the Advanced Master of Research in Art and Design.**

**The following text, *The Mumkinat of Remembrance*, is a textual exploration that documents different physical and metaphysical, political and poetical dimensions of my research. In this phase of my research, I apply a framework of methodology and theory based on Islamic thought.**

**Possibilities of reshaping and reimagining emerge from the Barzakh, alongside dreaming and the Euphrates, which serve as liminal sites for transmission and remembrance in the face of material loss, displacement and erasure.**

## Courtyard of Memory

Deir ez-Zor, 1995. She woke up to a sight she perceived as a nightmare. Shock in that moment, she was screaming, hitting away a bat she noticed in the last hours of the night biting on her newborn's little hand. We were sleeping under the sky's vast carpet in the courtyard. I watched her from under the covers, even though the bat flew away, she was still in panic. Quickly, my *habbaba* — *Allah yerhamha* and bless her soul — rushed with a bowl of water, which I later knew by the name of طاسة الرعدة, the fear-soothing bowl, and offered it: 'Say Bismillah and drink, Allah protect you all and ease your hearts.'

Years later, the courtyard would cease to exist, the sky's vast carpet was covered by the bombs' smoke towers, the bat lost its way through it and the bowl was nowhere to be found. The house in which we gathered in Deir ez-Zor was found in ruins after decades of tyrannical Assad regime rule — regional and Western imperial — and their militias' violences, the *Shabiha*<sup>1</sup> has stolen everything.

I confronted one of those *Shabiha* in my dreams. I was almost able to retrieve what was lost, burnt and stolen, only those ghosts vanished down a street in Antwerp, in the crevasse of my subconscious mind. I played this dream many times in my head. Every time I recall it, I confront them and I retrieve my family's albums, my grandmother's old bracelets, my grandfather's praying beads, textiles, objects and the bowl back to the old house. The old house in Deir ez-Zor, where the Syrian revolutions' chants for liberation were carried by the waters of the Euphrates.

I think about the dreams and the imaginations of the many lives confiscated in Palestine, Syria, Sudan and many nations fighting for liberation and better living conditions. In my dreams and imagination, images of justice are already taking place. I see such possibilities with the eyes of my imagination, I act with them as a collective destination, as a reality I know exists and desire to bring forth. The invocation of *Al-Haqq*<sup>2</sup> has for generations been the focus of our gaze, shaping our collective imagining, organising and resistance of a dignified life rooted in justice, free from all imperial and oppressive rule. An imagination of *Al-Haqq* realised by the Syrian people's resistance in overthrowing Assad's tyranny on 8 December 2024.

In the following sections, I will explore the relations between dream and imagination in invoking and (re)membering cultural practices.

The fear-soothing bowl carries references to Islamic and popular cultural practices of care. In this regard, I find it important to look at the status of dreams and imagination and their agency in Islamic views. This provides me with a positioning and

1 *Shabiha* (Levantine Arabic: شبيحة *Shabbiḥa*, pronounced [ʃabˈbiːħa]; also *Shabeeha* or *Shabbiha*) is a term for Assad state-sponsored militias who steal from and terrorise people.

2

2 *Al-Haqq: Haqq* (Arabic: حق *ḥaqq*) meaning to be suitable, to the requirements of wisdom, justice, truth or fact. In Islamic contexts, it is also interpreted as right and righteous reality. *Al-Haqq*, the Truth, is one of the 99 names or attributes of Allah in the Qur'an. It is often used to refer to Allah as the Ultimate Reality.

an understanding by which to approach the invoking, reshaping and remembering of this bowl, as well as its use in practice.

As a water vessel, this bowl connects me to the main water source in my city, the Euphrates river. This in turn allows me to explore the relationship of this cultural practice to generational knowledge, endurance, ritual, ecological matters and an alternative vision of the future.

Dreams and imagination have agency. Imagination, or *Khayal*,<sup>3</sup> is generally thought of as the process of conjuring that which does not exist, presently or subjectively. It has mnemonic, representational, fictional and creative functions. To imagine is to conjure an idea, a feeling, a thought, a sensory or affective response that was not present before the act of conjuring it began.

In *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*, Samer Akkach wrote that Muslim philosophers and mystics have articulated a concept of imagination with two distinct functions: dreaming and imagining. Dreaming is involuntary and forms the focus of mystical and rational sciences concerned with visionary experiences, dream interpretation and divine inspiration. They are messengers to us from the unknown, voices from our collective subconscious, warners of deep disturbances, bearers of glad tidings, carrying long hidden memories and prophetic voices of the future. Imagining is voluntary and multifaceted. With regard to creativity, the act of imagining has been viewed historically as involving the retaining by memory of images perceived through the senses (*al-quwwa al-hafiza* القوة الحافظة), the recalling of images when they are no longer in contact with the senses, and the composing of new images by the form-giving faculty (*al-quwwa al-musawwira* القوة المصوّرة). Imagination was also seen to mediate both analogical reasoning and symbolic representation by bringing abstract concepts and sensory forms together in meaningful relationships.<sup>4</sup> The dream world and the world of imagination are at once real and unreal, wherein things feel touchable yet remain unreachable. We can't get our hands on them, but they still live among us, and even if we don't notice them, they're still there. Imagination, like dreams, have an apparitional or phantasmal quality: they are perceivable, meaningful forms yet without physical presence.

Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) was a Muslim scholar, poet, philosopher and thinker. He viewed imagination as the creative cause of our existence and the powerful agency that enables us to remain in contact with the infinite and the Absolute. He differentiates three entities at the highest universal level: *al-Wujud al-Mutlaq* الوجود المطلق, 'Absolute Being', *al-'Adam al-Mutlaq* العدم المطلق, 'Absolute Non-Being', and a *Barzakh* البرزخ, 'Mediator', that bridges the other two. The first is the unrestricted existence of the Divine, the necessary Self-Existent; the second is the Non-Self-Existent; and the third is the intermediary domain of archetypes of all possible existence, *al-mumkinat* الممكنات.<sup>5</sup>

3 *Khayal*: Persian/Arabic خيال meaning imagination, recollection and the shadow or reflection of an object.

4 Akkach, S. (2005). *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*. State University of New York Press.

5 Ibid.

The intermediary world, the *Barzakh*, the Imaginal World, or the ‘isthmus’, derives from the Qur’an, which makes more than one allusion to its nature: ‘He has loosed the two seas to meet, yet between them stands an isthmus (Barzakh), which they cannot overrun’ (55:19–20); ‘It was he who brought forth the two seas; the one sweet and fresh, the other salt and bitter, and set between them an isthmus (Barzakh) and an insurmountable barrier’ (25:53).

Just as the border between light and shadow, the barrier, through its unitive-separative nature, brings together the two neighbouring realms into a meaningful relationship. The *Barzakh* is where the transition of the world from potentiality to actuality takes place.

I lean on these concepts within an Islamic framework to help me understand the imaginal as a position and space for creativity beyond dominating power structures, as a value system and a source of knowledge beyond the Euro-American, Western values that dominate the world, which have proved time and time again their selectiveness, rooted in white supremacy and systematic crimes.

It is within this framework, in this realm of all possible existence (*al-mumkinat* الممكّنات) — the bordering and unitive-separative meeting of two seas, the seen and unseen worlds, the imaginal dream realm, *alam al-khayal* عالم الخيال,<sup>6</sup> the *Barzakh* — where I position myself and where the conjuring of possibilities emerges. Within my research, imagining and dreaming became practices and methodologies to listen to oneself and what’s within, to acknowledge the multiplicity of voices embedded there.

Even as I find myself in a reality of dispossession, of forced exile and estrangement, able to cross physical colonial and tyrannical borders and prevented from crossing others, I am still able to cross and bypass barriers through other realms.

This position of being nearby from afar, is to find an expression of the *Barzakh*. It is here where I write, here where I remember, create and return to.

### *An image offered by the Euphrates*

A young woman gets off the plane in Damascus. She travels light in comparison to the other travellers. Apart from the trousers and shirt she wears, she carries only an empty bag over her shoulder. She exits the airport terminal. She refuses all taxis.

She does not take a bus, either, but leaves on foot. She reappears at the Baramkeh central bus station under the Sarout bridge that has been

<sup>6</sup> *Alam al-khayal*: world of imagination, عالم الخيال. This is the isthmus/Barzakh البرزخ. This world has been created by Allah as an intermediary between the world of the spirit and the world of the body.

reopened. There she looks around, she listens. She spends some time close to the buses leaving for Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. But she does not get on any of the buses that are leaving. She walks away. She walks two days and two nights to arrive in Palmyra. On her way, she absorbs what she sees, the arid landscape, here and there some rubble, the reflection of the sun on the sand. Palmyra appears in front of her like an oasis. It is at its height, as in 260 AD under Empress Zenobia's rule. Two more days and nights to get to Deir ez-Zor.

The landscape has changed, the city sits on the upper Euphrates, everything is green, the land is fertile. The governorate of Deir ez-Zor is rich in the natural resources oil and gas, the production of cotton and wheat is abundant as well, which made it an attraction for greed-driven powers. Halfway between Damascus and Baghdad, it has been a strategic point since Neolithic times, even before successive forces disputed the control of this region.

She sits on a stone by the river and closes her eyes. She listens to the water of the Euphrates and sees flows of images flash past her eyes. The longer she sits, the slower the image flux gets. After many hours, she opens her eyes and discovers the image she was looking for.<sup>7</sup>

It was an image of her and her siblings in the courtyard. She saw a bowl of water in the centre of the house, in the shade of vines. She reached for it, scooped water from the Euphrates and drank.

The question of how to remember طاسة الرعبة, the fear-soothing bowl, became a central focus of my research, with different sub-questions related to it. How can generational practices of personal and communal protection be remembered and practiced under conditions of state violence, climate crisis, exile and displacement? How do they transform, how are they read and practiced? These questions inform my ongoing research into memory and water-related traditions in Syria, specifically along the Euphrates river. Through gatherings, video, publishing and copper works, I explore how to facilitate conversations, invoke remembrance and reflections on transmission and imagining otherwise. The 'how' of displacement manifests in various forms across different situations, places and times. It repeats with intention and is shaped by varying degrees of relational proximity. In displacement, the means to remember remain, only they are displaced. To find and embody new forms and meanings, to find somewhere else and someone else, to find other imaginations and different *mumkinat*,<sup>8</sup> to mend through disruption and find a way to continue transmission.

More layers are added to the research when looking into the current condition of the Euphrates river, the river at the heart of Deir ez-Zor. Colonial planning,

7 Eid-Sabbagh, Y. and Toamah, J. (2021). *To Arrive Into the World, Is to Inherit What You Arrive Into*, What Stories Want.

8 *Mumkinat*: in Arabic ممكنات plural for Mumkin ممكن, meaning that which is possible, within reach, viable and feasible.

technologies of war, dictatorial rule, dams and other state-built infrastructure have led to the lowering water levels of the Euphrates. For the past years, the Atatürk Dam in Turkey has withheld the flow of the river's water into Syrian territories, and Assad's Euphrates Dam applied further control, which has caused deep changes to the land over the years. The constantly declining flow and the lowering water levels have led to an increase in water toxicity, impacting land and human lives — through interruptions to clean drinking water, irrigation, electricity, agriculture and food security — as well as terrestrial and aquatic animals.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural traditions that centre on water fade away with its disappearance. With rivers drying up, what role could the remembrance of water-centred care traditions play in lamenting and protesting this land abuse?

Material objects and cultural traditions carry memories of historic events, past encounters, people, stories, symbols and places within it. Such material objects can thus give us a strong sense of belonging and remind us of who we are. They represent rituals and pass on values, tales, ways of understanding and being in the world to generations to come. In this way, they are linked to intentions, relations and practices that can bring forth a community.<sup>10</sup> The use of the fear-soothing bowl, طاسة الرعبة — one example of a practice we shared as a family (inter)generationally — returned to me first in memories and dreams. Prayers of soothing came to me through memories and dreams. It is where time and space bend, and dreams are transmitted from the *Barzakh*. How we yearn to care for and be cared for in languages our senses recognise. How we search under the rubble for a common ground that resists and helps us resist, a ground that supports deep rituals of care, where nightmares are met with water.

Soothing with this bowl is practiced and remembered less today by people whose ancestors held this as part of their household's daily use. Global capitalism, colonialism, state tyranny, imperialisms and extractive means of relating to the land have erased many indigenous knowledges and wisdoms, not only threatening but destroying conditions and ecologies that sustain and make life.

People who were forcefully displaced brought material objects and personal items with them, either materially or in the inner corners of their memories, carrying their intentions or interacting with them intuitively. To confront displacement, soothe the pains of alienation while watching from afar open wounds burned by continuous systematic violence. I feel that طاسة الرعبة could reach us as we reach to it, remember us as we remember it. In offering the water within its engraved body, verses of protection and soothing are passed on by generations that endured and resisted. In conditions of dispossession and displacement, we may or may not have the material object, but we always carry it and its memory within our being. We can invoke multiple *mumkinat* to conjure it back into our everyday lives in ways that speak to alternative futures.<sup>11</sup>

9 Othman, A. (2023, October 2). *Drying up of Euphrates River Threatens Living Conditions in NE Syria*. NPASyria. <https://npasyria.com/en/105448/>

10 Byung-Chul, H. (2019). *The Disappearance of Rituals, A Topology of the Present*. Polity Press.

11 Adnan, E. (2012). *Sea and Fog*. Nightboat Books.

What is the remembrance of طاسة الرعبة, then, but the remembrance of an environment of belonging? The embrace of the connection of all beings across realms seen and unseen? The remembrance of such cultural traditions is linked to the retrieval of the material object as well as its immaterial practice, the world views and relations within which it is embedded. It's a cosmology of relations. As this water vessel, this fear-soothing bowl, is passed on, one is connected to generations before that likewise tried to survive something terrifying. It is many prayers and symbols that melt in water. It is water that remembers and becomes part of the body. It is being held through nightmares. It is an imagination brought forth from *Alam Al-Khayal*, instilling forms of fabulation that can trigger the conception of alternative futures, moving through and past nightmares.

### *A dream from the Barzakh.*

Granada, 2023. I saw my *habbaba*, *Allah yerhamha* and bless her soul. She was sleeping at the top of Alpujarra البشرات, on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, next to a raging sea. It was night and the waves were so high, they washed over the mountain slopes. My grandmother *Allah yerhamha* was sleeping on her right side, with her hand tucked under her cheek, just like she always did. When I saw her, I was wondering to myself, in the dream, how is it that she's sleeping so peacefully, unbothered by the waves? And how are the waves covering everything around her, yet leaving her sleeping with not a single drop on her? I woke up, grabbed طاسة الرعبة, and read prayers on it like my grandmother taught my mother and like my mother taught me.

Here I welcome you in a circle of remembrance where we reclaim the *mumkinat*. Imagine us in an inner courtyard by the Euphrates river with a decorated copper bowl, smooth from the outside and engraved on the inside, a bowl used for soothing the traumatic shock of fear, sickness or grief. The bowl is held in the hands of an elder, who fills it with water from the Euphrates as it struggles to flow. The bowl is passed to you. You can reach for it, hold it, imagine, say a prayer for action, then pass it to a different set of hands, those belonging to the next person in the circle. Let this intention become a connection, a will to belong and assert that something existed once, something that could persist through nightmares. Let us bring together neighbouring realms, entering into meaningful relationships, again and again. The shiny copper surface is evoked by the light of the golden hour, the copper taste of water is like a river running through dreams, the engraved symbols are etched on the skin, the prayers remembered by the tongue. We carry it, close to us, remaining present with its reality in the realm of the imagination, in our bodies. We sit with this imaginal world, in *Alam Al Khayal*. We have faith; we believe in the power of the *Al-Haqq* and the power of resistance in all realms.



Toamah, Joud. *A River Flows Through Dreams*, صلاة حلم. Video still, 2024.





**PIERRE-ANTOINE VETTORELLO**  
*Strolling Through the Eccentric Space:  
Unveiling the Potential Photo-History of Khady Diop  
in La Goutte d'Or*

**'French history is also sewn with black yarns  
by hands of ebony.'**

**—Alain Mabanckou, *Penser et écrire l'Afrique  
aujourd'hui*, 2017**

**'I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes  
to lose — to give up or surrender as part of moving  
into the center — but rather of a site one stays  
in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's  
capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility  
of radical perspective from which to see and  
create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.'**

**—bell hooks, *Choosing the Margin as a Space  
of Radical Openness*, 1989**

**This photographic essay aligns with my practice-led PhD  
research project at Sint Lucas School of Arts in Antwerp,  
titled *Black Yarns: Women's Resistance Through Clothing  
in the Senegalese Diaspora of Paris (1939–1966)*. My  
focus is on exploring the narratives of Wolof women who  
used their style of dress as a form of resistance against  
colonial domination in Paris. Therefore, this essay exam-  
ines African textile stores — selling textiles including  
wax-resist prints, Bogolan, Faso Dan Fani, Indigo, and**

**Bazin — located in the La Goutte d’Or area of the north of Paris. Specifically, it attempts to establish their historiography, as there are no existing sources on the subject. Through photography inspired by the memory of Khady Diop, a Wolof woman who lived in Paris between 1939 and 1944, I initiated a historiography of African textile stores within the Parisian space. Alongside mainstream Parisian fashion stores, these retailers serve as distinct ‘centres’ that contribute to a unique narrative of cultural exchange and expression. The dynamic of African textile stores evolves as they change, open and close, reflecting the ever-shifting African diaspora and disrupting Parisian Eurocentrism. While the La Goutte d’Or African textile stores remain, questions arise as to how to preserve their history. When were these stores first established, and how to map them? First, I will address the surprising lack of academic fashion studies within a French context, which seems paradoxical given the significance and complexity of fashion in Paris. However, this paradox can be explained by the centralised nature of the French Republic, rooted in monarchical traditions, which favours recentralisation over decentralisation, making anything peripheral seem ‘eccentric’. Next, I will explore the history of the La Goutte d’Or neighbourhood, highlighting its role as a site of resistance. Following that, I will present the story of Khady Diop, a Senegalese woman who lived in Paris in 1939, and imagine the places where she might have sourced the textiles to sew her garments. Finally, we will visit shops I’ve encountered in the area, examining contemporary narratives through a photo-walk, framed by the context provided in the earlier sections. By delving into their history through a promenade, I could begin to understand the role of African textile stores in shaping cross-cultural identities and fashion in Paris. This photo-walk through the streets aims to document their presence as an integral part of the rich fabric of Parisian history.**

## Decentring Parisian fashion

The history of textiles from the African continent sold in Paris and purchased by the diaspora is often overlooked in a French context where fashion studies only emerged in 2018 and have not yet reached a self-reflexive state (Bass-Krueger et al., 2018). When the French Fashion Institute and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne launched its doctoral programme in 2017, it joined a long-standing tradition of critical theory in fashion studies, which had already been well-established for decades in Anglo-American and Northern European countries, exploring the societal role of fashion. Hence, French fashion history is often narrowed to an early-twentieth-century Parisian aesthetic, obscuring the long history of colonial relations and postcolonial trade exchanges with colonised territories in Africa. For this reason, mainstream and luxury fashion and textiles created on or for the African continent are conceptually divorced from each other while influencing one another. Previous researchers have analysed trade routes from the Mediterranean sea and their influence on sartorial history, and in doing so looked at textiles used by numerous designers, from Paul Poiret to Yves Saint Laurent. Nevertheless, in France not much research has been dedicated to analysing the history of the African textile stores in Paris themselves and how their textiles have been an inherent part of the Parisian landscape since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This paper, with the accompanying photographs taken in February 2022, advocates for a historiography that encompasses a plurality of French identities, not only covering the history of the central luxury fashion houses of Paris but going beyond these to include another *centre* comprising different types of stores. These stores, celebrated by the African diaspora, are an inherent part of the complex fabric of Parisian society, in an era marked by heightened racism and an active fight against the erasure of the histories of the African diaspora.<sup>2</sup> This article documents a walking experience during a residency in Paris in 2022, where I was invited to the Cité Internationale des Arts and explored the dynamics of the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood.

Subsequently, this walk was carried out in memory of Khady Diop, a Senegalese woman whose traces were found in Paris from 1939 until 1944, in the background. The final part provides an overview of the long-standing presence of African textile stores in Paris, based on a mix of oral sources and research from the French National Registry of Companies. The goal of this text is to highlight these stores and their legacies, while encouraging the reader to explore the streets of La Goutte d'Or on their own. My focus is not only on recognising the contributions made by retailers of African textiles to the fashion scene of Paris, alongside mainstream brands, but also on celebrating how they embody a rich tradition of self-expression through clothing on the part of French-Senegalese people, among other identities. The presence of fabrics like wax-resist, Bogolan, Thioup or Indigo, Madras and Bazin reflects the diverse voices that shape Parisian fashion. It reveals the involvement of various European producers — such as in Austria, Ivory Coast, the Netherlands and Czechia — in creating African textiles. Through the stories of Khady Diop in Paris from 1939 until 1944, we can trace the long-standing sartorial history between Senegal and France, and the agency of a woman who wore her Wolof clothes.

## La Goutte d'Or: resisting sartorial centrality

La Goutte d'Or is a place of multiple narratives. In *L'Assommoir* (1877), Emile Zola portrayed the lives of workers struggling in poverty during the 1860s and 1870s. La Goutte d'Or then served as a vibrant hub for numerous Parisians of modest means: artisans, traders, refugees. In this way, it is a place that holds layers of French history that have often been overlooked. In 1991, the neighbourhood became the subject of ridicule after Jacques Chirac infamously remarked during a political meeting about the 'noise and nasty smell' of migrants living in the area. His words were later referenced in songs, including Zebda's 1995 track and album *Le Bruit et l'Odeur*, NTM's 1998 lyric '*Je combats ceux dérangés par les odeurs et les bruits*' and,

1 Ingrid Houssaye Michienzi's work on Mediterranean trade routes examines the transnational dynamics of the trade in textiles, pigments, and colours.

2 Here, I am referring to the work of counter-archives by associations and notably at Salle Saint Bruno, which houses an archive of La Goutte d'Or, offering a historical collection including newspapers, books and articles.

more recently, Booba's *Bateau Pirate* with the lyric '*vient de quitter le port/Bruit et l'odeur*'.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, singer Rachid Taha performed his album *Barbès* (1991), presenting a contrasting and more positive depiction of the neighbourhood. The title track celebrates the area's multicultural vibrancy: '*C'est dans le dix-huitième Barbès, Y'a jamais jamais de problème fi Barbès.*'<sup>4</sup>

Notably, in 1996, La Goutte d'Or became the focal point of significant social struggle when 300 undocumented migrants sought sanctuary in the Saint-Bernard church and were aided by Father Henri Coindé and many volunteers. On the night of 23 August, the migrants were forcibly expelled by authorities. This event deeply affected generations of French citizens and this struggle still resonates on the streets of the eighteenth arrondissement, where La Goutte d'Or is a known hub for anti-capitalist, anarchist and anti-racist movements, combating anti-Muslim hatred.<sup>5</sup> Despite facing the effects of gentrification, the neighbourhood retains its vibrant cultural identity, with independent bookstores such as La Régulière, located on 43 rue Myrha (since 2016), and The Institute of Islamic Cultures, which opened in 2006 on 19 rue Léon.

More recently, in 2023, amidst the debate over whether young girls should be allowed to wear the *abaya*, a traditional-looking dress worn in the Arab world, French President Macron proposed testing a uniform consisting of 'a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a jacket', placing so-called Western clothing at the core of French attire, while othering any non-Western dress. He added in an interview: 'we do not want any eccentric outfits' at schools.<sup>6</sup> This statement raises concerns about the meaning of 'eccentric' clothing, placing certain clothing outside of sartorial centrality, in the margins. The word *eccentric* originates from the Greek *ekkentros*, meaning 'out of centre' (*ek*, 'out of' and *kentron*, 'centre'). Initially used in geometry to describe objects with off-centre orbits, the word evolved metaphorically to describe unconventional people or behaviours that deviate from societal norms and expectations.

In this context, is it possible to reclaim a sartorial French habit of wearing African textiles, or any other indigenous garment, and claim it as inherently part of the French centre?



<sup>1</sup>Fig. A1 Some posters on a wall, on the left, from the collective 18 en Lutte, which works to support and expand social, economic and anti-racist solidarity and action in the borough. On the right, from street artist @a2\_louisemichel, a portrait of Louise Michel, a figure of French feminism, French anarchist and figure of the Paris Commune.

### *Khady Diop in Paris: resistance through clothing*

During a research residency at Cité Internationale des Arts, I retraced the footsteps of Khady Diop, a Senegalese woman residing in Paris from 1939 to 1944, alongside other Senegalese colonial subjects and citizens. The second wife of French MP Galandou Diouf, Khady Diop pursued her passion for sewing garments on her Singer sewing machine in a bourgeois apartment. She began her journey in the upper class Trocadéro district of Paris. Her social decline is evident from her later residing on rue Duc in May 1944, during the time of the Allied bombings of Paris. Her second husband, William Kane subjected her to harsh treatment, violently expelling her with the assistance of the Gestapo. In 1943–44, she faced significant difficulties in Paris.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by her resistance to conform to European fashion in 1939 — when she publicly declared, 'No, I won't dress European style' — I was compelled to uncover her narrative and explore the streets where she might have procured textiles to craft her own garments in the Wolof fashion. I wondered where Khady Diop sourced her fabrics and trims. Did she have peers to assist her? And does this act of dressing as a form of resistance still persist today on the streets of Paris?

<sup>3</sup> This tale was sparked during a stroll with his companion, Alain Juppé. In this monologue, Paris mayor Jacques Chirac laments the plights of an imagined average French worker facing difficult circumstances upon returning to work, residing alongside a migrant family who 'abuse' social assistance, live in polygamous relationships with 'four or five spouses', and have 'fifty children', all while earning four times the income of the worker. Chirac recounted this anecdote to a gathering of his right-wing political party supporters and the story later became a theme referenced by French singers of the 1990s, including NTM, Gizmo, Sadek and Rachid Taha, who used

it in a counterattack, denouncing racism.

<sup>4</sup> 'Barbès is in the eighteenth arrondissement, There are never problems in Barbès.'

<sup>5</sup> Traves, H. [HugoDécrypte]. (2023, September 15). *Uniforme à l'école: Emmanuel Macron favorable à des expérimentations* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQdM9QHbnDQ>

<sup>6</sup> Grenier, R. (1945, December 4). *Le pape noir devant la cour de justice*. Combat: organe du mouvement de libération française. Gallica. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4748970t/f2.item.r=prince>.

In France, colonial imperialism has driven transnational efforts to produce textiles in its colonies. Victoria L. Rovine cites Charles Béart, Director of Senegal's Department Education: '[In 1937] the Peuhls (Fulani) embroidered designs from Galeries Lafayette for white women.'<sup>7</sup> She argues that interwar France was particularly conducive to a craft-centred nostalgia, with both positive and negative connotations. In other words, the development of crafts in the colonies served as both an opportunity to advance French imperialism through economic means and a way to frame colonised cultures as preserving traditional practices, 'imagined as frozen in a timeless present,' while also implying their inferiority. Today, African-European textile merchants are interwoven in the fabric of the Parisian landscape, asserting their agency, securing a place in the capital and gaining the loyalty of a Parisian and international diaspora. These stores offer a decentralised response in the Parisian landscape, serving as spaces of resistance by providing access to both craftsmanship and eccentric fashion alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

In 1939, none of the current African textiles stores in the area existed. Khady Diop's only options for sourcing her textiles were in the areas of Montmartre, Hausmann Boulevard and more precisely the Galeries Lafayette, le Bon Marché, Dreyfus Marché Saint-Pierre, Bouchara, Tissus Reine or Tissus Laïk, which sold fabrics and trims. Consequently, another of Khady Diop's options would have been the diasporic store Au pauvre nègre, located at 79 rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. This store sold all kinds of goods from the colonies, from wooden objects, jewellery and textiles, owned by the scandalous William Kane, aka Prince Alioune Mamadou Kane. Destiny led Kane to become Diop's husband, as evidenced by a newspaper archive from 1943, during her second husband's trial, when she was described as 'standing in the middle of the aisles (...) exuding grandeur, with her Senegalese hairstyle and boubou'.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>[Fig. 8]</sup> Khady Diop sewing her garments, sat next to her husband Galandou Diouf in their apartment in Trocadero in January 1939. Source: Débia, J. (1939, January 25). 'L'A.O.-F toute entière se lèverait demain au service de la mère patrie...' nous déclare Galandou Diouf, député du Sénégal, redevenu parisien pour quelques jours. *L'Excelsior*. *Journal illustré*, January 25, 1939, p. 1.

### *Walking in the footsteps of Khady Diop in La Goutte d'Or*

In La Goutte d'Or, my first stop is Maison Château Rouge, a project founded by Youssouf Fofana <sup>[Fig. 1]</sup>. Having grown up in the area, Fofana launched his label Les Oiseaux Migrateurs ('Migrating Birds') there in 2014, sourcing textiles through local stores. I browsed through his printed fabrics, home interior designs and garments, occasionally glancing at two beautiful women dressed in garments with vibrant wax-resist prints. One wore a dress adorned with blue and white sunflower-looking patterns, while the other wore a red and orange dress featuring bird motifs. I felt immersed in the 'cool' vibe of La Goutte d'Or, in this store that attracts an international audience of young urban travellers. The two women seemed to be Americans and while one was taking a selfie beside the dress she then purchased, the other was on the phone: 'Real talk, that's mad cool, bro.'

Next door is Binta Africa at 46 rue Myrha, <sup>[Fig. 2]</sup> a store owned by the Fofana family, selling Faso Dan Fani, Indigo and Bogolan textiles. I imagined Khady Diop admiring the textiles stacked on the window — fabulous mud-printed fabrics called Bogolan — as she waited her turn to talk with the salesperson. The distinctive smell of earth reminded me of how these textiles were made from plants and mud, transporting my mind back to memories of Saint-Louis markets.

Then I entered the store SARRL TOUBA <sup>[Fig. 3]</sup> located at 64 rue Myrah. I was in search of information about the area, some

<sup>7</sup> Béart, C. (1938) Les Dispositions Esthétiques des Indigènes et l'Évolution de la Culture. *Congrès International de l'Évolution Culturelle des Peuples Coloniaux, Rapports et Compte Rendu, Exposition Internationale de Paris* (p. 111), as cited in Rovine, A. (2021) *Crafting Colonial Power*. In Biro, Y. & Etienne, N. (Eds.), *Rhapsodic*

*Objects, Art, Agency, and Materiality* (1700–2000). De Gruyter (p. 180).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Nouveau rebondissement dans l'affaire Mamadou Kane. (1943, February 21). *Paris-Midi*. Gallica. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4736148b/f3.item.r=alioune%20mamadou%20kane.zoom>

historical hints. Inside the store, I was invited to look at the jewellery and custom-made shoes. *Tout est fait à la main*, someone tells me ('It's all made by hand'). I admired the fabrics stacked on the wall but couldn't help thinking about the textiles already waiting to be used in my closet. Adding more would only amplify the guilt of returning home to an already overflowing space.

After, I popped into SARL DEBO <sup>[Fig. 4]</sup> on 12 rue Léon to find trims for a costume. I was on the lookout for Brandenburg fasteners like the ones you'd find on military apparel. As soon as I walked in, I was greeted with friendly smiles and the mouth-watering scent of food being savoured by someone in the back. Luckily, I found exactly what I needed without breaking the bank. I might use it for my friend Lasseindra's costume. She's got a ball coming up soon.

From there I headed to NGOUYI-Wax (Moussa), <sup>[Fig. 5]</sup> which was too busy for me to enter. However, I could overhear some of the conversations, which at this time of day revolve around what will be on the table for dinner. Later on, I walked in front of Bazin Touba 56, <sup>[Fig. 6]</sup> named after the holy city of Touba in Senegal, the holy site of the Mouride brotherhood, who follow the teachings of Cheikh Amadou Bamba (1853–1927). Many stores here were referring to this holy city in Senegal, emphasising the presence of the Senegalese diaspora in the neighbourhood. Most of the stores were selling Bazin Riche, the *crème de la crème* of fabrics. This textile stands as a colonial construct. Just like wax fabric, Bazin is an industrial fabric, designed and manufactured by Europeans, which has paradoxically become emblematic of West African identity.<sup>10</sup> The expression *Bazin Riche* refers to a damask cotton textile with a shiny aspect that makes it luxurious. It is produced in many colours and sometimes embroidered. This textile is an industrialised European version of *Thioup*, a traditional technique using tie-dye and indigo pigments. I noticed many stores selling the renowned Vlisco brand, founded in 1848 in the Netherlands, alongside some Bazin Riche from Getzner, an



[Fig. 1] detail inside of the store Maison Chateau Rouge belonging to Youssouf Fofana, 10 bis rue Myrha, Paris.



[Fig. 2] The entrance of Binta Africa, 46 rue Myrha, Paris. A client waiting at the entrance of a textile store called Binta Africa (established 1984). Some textiles (Bogolan) are stacked by the window.



[Fig. 3] 'SARL TOUBA Couture & Vente'. A store window with mannequins dressed in fashionable clothes, a stand on the right showing low high heels covered with shimmering textiles. On the wall behind are some wax-resist printed textiles.



[Fig. 4] A trim store, SARL DEBO, with some scooters and bikes parked in front. Some trims and yarns are stacked by the window. The window display — quite intricate and containing hidden treasures — shows many possibilities for craftspeople and designers.

Austrian group Getzner Textil AG, established in 1818, began developing its African textile department in 1980. We can read on their website, ‘Our bazins tell stories of style and passion. From the vibrant streets of Dakar to the colourful markets of Bamako, we’ve captured the spirit and transformed it into precious fabrics.’<sup>11</sup>

I finished my walk with a visit to the long-established Marché Saint-Pierre — Dreyfus <sup>[fig. 7, 8]</sup>, a local institution in Paris. The store, known for its extensive selection, spanning several floors, has now included wax-resist printed textiles in its offerings. Mannequins dressed in these textiles are displayed throughout the store, showcasing a variety of fashion looks. I purchased a few metres of Madras fabric to make a dress. The saleswoman smiles warmly at me. Her charm was evident as she asked, ‘How many metres would you like?’ Holding her long wooden ruler, almost like a magic wand, she deftly measured and cut the fabric into two pieces with her large scissors. From a small notebook in a pouch at her waist, she teared off a blue piece of paper and handed it to me, saying, *Voilà, vous pouvez aller à la caisse* (‘Here you go, you can go to the cashier’).

Through the act of walking and photographing, I collected stories and recognised how these narratives were integral to the fashion landscape of Paris, each with its own history. While Orlando Patterson discussed the social death of Black individuals, I aimed at emphasising the importance of tracing historiography to reposition these stores’ histories on a map.<sup>12</sup> By decentring perspectives and embracing the ‘eccentric’ as a form of radical acceptance, I believe we could unveil unpublished historiographies. Promoting the acts of self-fashioning and engaging with local tailors and craftspeople, decentred fashion serves as a form of resistance. This study built a foundation that artists, researchers can build upon to explore the permanence found within the ephemeral. Stores come and go, and we are likely to see new stories being built in new places.



[Fig. 5] Window display at NGOUVI-Wax (Moussa), 41 rue des Poissonniers, Paris.



[Fig. 6] Bazin Touba 56, located at 56 Rue Polonceau, Paris, selling Bazin textiles. Selling the renowned label VEBA, textiles produced in Broumov, Czechia.



[Fig. 7] Mannequins dressed in wax-resist and Madras textiles inside of the store Marché Saint-Pierre — Dreyfus at 2 Rue Charles Nodier.



[Fig. 8] Wax-print textiles inside of the store Marché Saint-Pierre — Dreyfus, 2 Rue Charles Nodier.

11 La véritable essence de l’élégance africaine, découvrez la magie du bazin de Getzner. (2024, June 24). Getzner Textil AG. <https://www.getzner.at/en>

12 I’m referencing Patterson, O. (1982) *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press, which emphasises the need for a diasporic historiography to address the loss of heritage. In this work, Patterson discusses how the enslaved individuals were ‘culturally isolated from the social heritage of their ancestors.’

## *La Goutte d'Or and a Parisian Tradition of Textile Stores Popular with the Afrodiaspora*

A brief historical overview of textile retailers popular among the Afrodiaspora, in the Haussmann, Montmartre and La Goutte d'Or areas, primarily sourced from the publicly available French National Registry of Companies, provides insights into their potential opening dates:

### **Barbès-Clignancourt-Montmartre-Haussmann**

Les Grands Magasins  
Dufayel — 1856–1930  
(rue de Clignancourt)  
Galeries Lafayette — since 1894  
Dreyfus Marché Saint-Pierre  
— since 1920 (Montmartre)  
Tissus Reine — since 1930  
(Montmartre)  
Bouchara  
Haussmann — 1935 — 2008  
(Grands Boulevards)  
Tissus Laïk — since 1937  
(Montmartre)  
Tati — since 1948 (Barbès)

### **Sèvres-Babylone**

Le Bon Marché — since 1838

### **Goutte-d'Or area**

Simvitex dentelle — since 1983  
Wax Joli Afrique — since 1984  
Binta Africa — since 1984  
Ouest Africa — since 1995  
Diam International — since 1995  
Boutique Mariame — since 1996  
Megawag — since 1996  
Batex — since 2000  
Mama Boutique — since 2000  
Asafo Market — since 2001  
Kalitex — since 2001  
Sarl. Debo — since 2001  
Jara Couture — since 2003  
Sabouniouma Textile  
— since 2005  
Kumasi Market — since 2011  
La Parisienne — since 2011  
Mama Getzner — since 2011  
Mazalay Couture — since 2011  
Naomie Beauté — since 2012  
ME RE MA — since 2013  
Getzner France — since 2015  
Peulh vagabond — since 2016  
Diagne Couture — since 2017  
SM multiservices — since 2017  
Maison Château Rouge  
— since 2017  
Sarl Waxburry — since 2018  
IBA Spécialiste du Wax  
— since 2018  
Sarl Dane Retouches  
— since 2018  
Ngoyi Wax — since 2019  
Sylla Textiles — since 2021

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**IMANE B.K. & TUNDÉ ADEFIOYE**  
*Towards Braver Spaces Antwerp*

**Towards Braver Spaces Antwerp was seeded at the end of 2020 and has been making space since 2021. A time when, more than ever, society at large was trying to find ways of creating networks of solidarity. Since then, the collective has facilitated different spaces to varying degrees of success. In these articles, Imane and Tundé, who have been part of the collective since the beginning, write about how they have worked, the impact of their work on themselves and others, and the changes that have arisen in terms of their own perspectives on the work they do within these spaces. This reflection moment was made possible by the one-year SLA research project grant, which allowed them the possibility to look back at the work they have been doing since the start of Braver Spaces. This has also provided them with the ability to close a chapter and think of the potential of what may or may not be next.**

**While written separately, both articles offer insights into how doing the work of creating spaces can yield definite benefits. At the same time, these articles serve as reminders as to how important it is that those creating and facilitating these spaces remain aware of their own positionality, their past, what they are bringing into the spaces and how these elements impact those present in the spaces. In the case of Towards Braver Spaces Antwerp, most of those using the spaces have been racialised and often exist on different intersectional realities. They share insights on how our experiences have been when attempting to navigate these realities in different settings.**

**In the texts you will find that the term ‘we’ is used interchangeably when addressing both the collective and the facilitators who organised sessions with Braver Spaces. The facilitators were not always just Tundé and Imane, but also members of the collective. Imane chose to explicitly credit Kaouter and Seonmin by name since without their proposal Braver spaces might not have happened in the way it did.**

IMANE B.K.

*Reflecting on Inclusive Practices Within  
Braver Spaces*



With this text, I would like to formulate what has been happening in the spaces we have organised so far in the Braver Spaces project through the perspective of my experience as a facilitator and to highlight some of the choices that marked points of discomfort during this process.

When I enrolled in the SLARG research group to work on this project, it was totally unclear to me how the concept of braver spaces could evolve within the walls of Sint Lucas Antwerpen, School of Arts. Within this research group, I became an artistic researcher within an institutional structure who was trying to think, reflect and write about the complex reality of creating a community that attempts to foster a practice of a 'braver space'. I graduated from Sint Lucas in 2017 with a master's degree in fine arts as a graphic designer. With an increasing interest in the Black Lives Matter movement, inclusion and diversity developing around me, I slowly found my way to the diversity and decolonisation discourses inside Sint Lucas and the art world I was becoming a part of. I joined We Cannot Work Like This, a small collective that was started at Sint Lucas. The collective tried to provide a safer space for the intersectional experiences of people of colour in arts and design — with an understanding of the historical and contemporary dimensions of colonisation — which we felt art institutions had failed to create. We gathered with staff and other students who were interested and tried to come up with a plan of action that ranged from casual gatherings for conversation to a

TUNDÉ ADEFIOYE

*Eventually Towards  
Braver Spaces*



*Braver Spaces Antwerp began as a small online meeting space, and it was never our intention to be where we are years later. While we are still a small collective, we have gone on to do a lot of varied things during our few years of trying to create different types of spaces. The initial Braver Spaces idea came out of an urgent need that rose from the dust kicked up by the movements of Black Lives, #metoo and Covid in 2020 and 2021. There were questions being raised about the way we engage with ourselves, with who we considered our community/communities, what we understood as justice and the role institutions played in our personal and professional existence, especially institutions built on foundations of colonial sediment. While these questions existed, Braver Spaces never attempted to answer them but instead created spaces that would eventually provide new understandings for those who joined us.<sup>A</sup>*

*Over 2023 and 2024, we were offered the opportunity to slow down and try and reflect on the work we have done. While our slowing down was not always so slow, this article does in a way create a possibility for reflection on what we have done and how we could have done things differently. Even more specifically, how I can address my own presence, actions and history in relation to being an actor in these spaces. While it is not always successful — take two — while I will not always be successful in doing this, I must reckon with my own ambitions and desires and understand how they influenced what these spaces became and potentially what they might become. In a way, this article encourages me to do something different. Because, for so long, I have performed the role of an Invisible*

<sup>A</sup> We recently changed our name from Braver Spaces to Towards Braver Spaces. Braver Spaces was too definitive. As if I and the others in the space had arrived somewhere. What Towards Braver Spaces does is in the name: it asserts a striving that is less finite and assumes a possible progression towards something that is yet undefined. This change in name was due in part to conversations I was having with others who had been part of Braver Spaces, along with questions and doubts I was having about my role. Because I certainly still have many doubts.

project we called 'Make The Cannon / Break The Cannon', where we looked at ways to decolonise the school's library. After a while the collective shrank and moved outside the walls of Sint Lucas, and me and four other artist friends from Sint Lucas continued to gather and find ways to organise ourselves. After some time, the collective dissolved, mostly because we were operating with no money and it was very difficult to manage with our working schedules and other plans. This was my first engagement in decolonial practices. Although short, it inspired me to shift my practice towards inclusion, decolonisation and anti-racist ethics, and I found myself becoming a facilitator and researcher of the Braver Spaces project.

Safe and braver spaces have emerged in many contexts, including art schools. In my experience, safe spaces seem to be more common, perhaps because they are spaces with clearer boundaries. By this I mean that when attempting to foster a safe space, the starting point is to exclude that which makes us feel unsafe. Safe spaces started as a grassroots movement by queer folks of colour to create an environment where they could live and thrive, in spaces removed from the dangers the world brought forth.<sup>1</sup> When organising braver spaces, however, we try to mediate and sit with the discomfort in the room. From my personal experience, a braver space has a certain level of safety and comfort and the more you know and trust the people who make it, the more you can feel this in the space. The discomfort, however, comes from knowing that when we tackle vulnerabilities, shame and wrongdoings collectively, there is always a point of friction that can ignite conflict, violence, distrust etc. Sitting and dealing with these emotions and what manifests beyond them is what makes a space braver. What I have also appreciated and had to learn as a facilitator and participant is that transparency and honesty really need to be at the forefront. We need to be honest and come to terms

*Man, doing a lot but Wearing a Mask of humility that was supposed to show I was not taking up space, when in fact I was taking up considerable space, whether acknowledged or not.<sup>B</sup>*

### *How do we carry ourselves?*

*None of us has all the answers ... but if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge ... when we set about trying to transform society, we must remember that we ourselves will also need to transform. Our imagination of what a different world can be is limited. We are deeply entangled in the very systems we are organizing to change. White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist everywhere. We have all so thoroughly internalized these logics of oppression ... Being intentionally in relation to one another, a part of a collective, helps to not only imagine new worlds, but also to imagine ourselves differently. (Kaba: 2021, 4)*

*This Kaba quote is a reminder and a leap towards future possibilities. It's a reminder of the fact that, while we may do work to transform our society, we do not step into the process perfectly or with answers. The answers, if any, are unfolding, often as we go. It's, in a way, a quote that contains so much of the abolitionist and transformative ambitions some of us doing social justice work aspire to, but also underscores just how much work we still have to do. It's a reminder that the mistakes we make and the wrongs some of us might have done towards others in the past, and will cause in the future, should not be the extent of or limit on the work we can do to create and participate in 'other-worlding', which proposes alternatives to the current way of engaging with the world around us.<sup>C</sup>*

*There are theories that help me better understand how I perform in the world. Theories that also give a kind of strength. Theories that force a certain accountability, without forcing an erasure of self.*

<sup>1</sup> Some important American examples include: the Combahee River Collective, the ballroom halls of Harlem and the Third World Gay revolution (see Outhistory, n.d.). More locally, I have been inspired by the collective and safer spaces work of: Black History Month Belgium, back2soilbasics, FATSABBATS, Mothers & Daughters and Skin Mutts, and others who do very important work but remain hidden for their safety.

<sup>B</sup> *Invisible Man* here is capitalised as it refers to Ralph Ellison's book of the same name and *Wearing a Mask* refers to Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem written in the late 1800s. Both reference Black existence within white-dominant society. Specifically in the US context. In my case, I use it as an African American in the European context.  
<sup>C</sup> 'Other-worlding' resonates throughout the writings of Donna Haraway, Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin and others.

with the fact that we will not be able to cater to everyone's needs and wishes all the time. Humans are complex beings beyond our imagination, so navigating braver spaces is a nuanced process. Being aware of this complexity is very important. Understanding that there are no guidelines that will encompass all experiences is key and the need to establish a clear and open framework to work around problems that arise has been the greatest learning curve so far.

In 2021, I began to work as a researcher at Sint Lucas. A little less than a year before, Tundé invited me to get involved in some sessions he was organising with students from his class. They were looking to create a space to meet and continue the conversations that were happening around the intersections of art, politics and cultural criticism. These gatherings took place during the first Covid-19 pandemic. We gathered online on Friday afternoons and these moments became the very beginning of what we now like to call Braver Spaces. In our gatherings we started sharing lived experiences out of a certain necessity to connect and find solidarity amongst peers. It is important to note that Braver Spaces would not exist without the two students, Seonmin and Kaouter, who approached Tundé asking if there was a way for them to create a space outside of the course that allowed them to explore and engage in topics that wove through their academic studies and their own personal experiences. Tundé's course provided a space for students to be able to critically engage in sociopolitical issues and questions within an artistic context and students — especially those with a marginalised background and those who are sensitive of how they might or might not carry their whiteness — found it an important space that needed some care and attention. The other side of the coin, as in most cases, were students that did not care much for the content of the course and were very careless when it came to keeping the space safe for conversation.

*Theories that allow me to understand that I exist in the line of many others who have tried but maybe fell short of their expectations and of those of a society that is cloaked in white robes, or whiteness generally. Saidiya Hartman calls these experiences of trying 'beautiful experiments', which can lead to critical fabulations (Hartman: 2019). Here I would like to look at my work, especially as a Braver Spaces facilitator, through Tavia Nyong'o's concept of 'Afro-fabulation' (Nyong'o: 2019). This concept works for me and the organising I was trying to do with Braver Spaces, because it allows space for errors, allows space for imperfections. Imperfections that we often do not have enough patience for, not to mention the time to do the type of transformative justice that is required to work through them when necessary. Because when duty calls to do the work of repair, often (diversity) work asks us simultaneously to help put out another fire set by dominant society.*

*Returning to Nyong'o, one might assume that fabulation has to do with simply being fabulous, in fact that is far from reality. Nyong'o is very much focused on the 'perceived failures' that make a person. He explains:*

*Although I am most consumed by the everydayness of black performance, one ordinary and common-sense usage of 'fabulation' must be clarified at the outset. A fabulist in my parlance is nothing like a liar. More nearly, fabulation exposes the relation between truth and lying in an other-than-moral sense, to paraphrase Nietzsche. My interest in fabulationality—the entangled and angular socialites generated by fabulation—is of course also inspired by the 'poetics of relation' pioneered by Édouard Glissant. It exposes the difference in every repetition, as exemplified by a writer like Gayl Jones, in particular in her novel *Mosquito*, in which her garrulous narrator promises to distinguish between 'communicating' and 'camouflage'. (Nyong'o: 2019, 5)*

*Looking back into the archives for examples of Afro-fabulation, Nyong'o investigates the life of Black gay performer and transient Jason*

It became a very relevant need that Braver Spaces had to exclude certain individuals who might cause others to feel unsafe and uncomfortable, so we started looking into how to make the gatherings safer.

There was an ease and a sense of trust within our gatherings that felt very comforting. We seemed to have been going through some collective traumatic experiences and the different subjects we would discuss every week became a catalyst to be able to address these in a very informal way. Fast forward to 2021, and we began meeting physically and looking at ways to apply for funding to help each other's practices and wishes. We brainstormed and collectively came up with a programme that Tundé and I followed through on within our research time. Tundé and I became facilitators and the rest of the group participated and organised sessions and workshops around various topics of interest. Among other activities, we provided healing spaces for queer marginalised folks, we organised supper clubs for artists to come and share their stories via artistic food-based practices and we organised a summer school around the dichotomy of knowledge and knowledge-based systems.

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It felt very important to me to use my SLARG research year for reflection on Braver Spaces, but I did not want to alienate the people who formed the original collective. I wanted to create an active practice of applied research where we were not just reading and reflecting on things but where we could, instead, apply the theories written many moons ago about the topics that moved us, such as diversity, racism, intersectionality, politics, abolition and inclusion. The goal would be to share as much as we could through a framework of recreation. It was not the first time that

*Holliday (né Aaron Payne), 'captured' in the film A Portrait of Jason (Shirley Clarke, 1967). Holliday, the person being interviewed in the film, is a Black individual who is high during the filming and has a relatively difficult existence, who is being spotlighted on a platform, and in a space, not of their own choosing—the white director's living room. Holliday, a gay Black man in the 1960s, who is an excessive drinker, is essentially chastised by Clarke and the voices of other people not seen in the film. Those not seen appear in some way like the great white moral society of the time, who dictate the wrongs of Black American life in general and more specifically the life of Black gay men. People who are presumed close to Holliday, who could potentially hold Holliday accountable in community and in private, do not do so. Instead, those we hear in the film, who have some kind of access to Holliday, make a public example of him. Call out culture, before the term was a thing. What Holliday experiences is a racist disloyalty par excellence in an experimental film. And we still maintain this fetish for public displays of holding failures accountable that reach back centuries, some of them with very racist undertones and overtures. Instead, when one fails, including those of us who lead and facilitate, is it possible to be a failure in collectivity? How does one hold space for that? How do others—interlocutors or allies—in that collective (temporarily or otherwise) hold space for that failure without being burdened and without being implicated? To what extent can we be accomplices in collectives that are working towards attempting system change and transformation of our collective marginalisations and oppressions, when there are individuals who have failed fabulously and might continue to do so? Should we hold space for them, and do they also deserve to be in collectivity?*

*Wild-seeding an abolitionist /  
post-work potentiality*

*I ask the above questions about how we hold failure, thinking of the future of the work I want to do, thinking of the seeding that has been*

someone sought to create a pocket of space, time and money to ponder the idea of braver spaces, and I really wanted to put our research into practice. The practical aspect proved to be challenging, however, because it was defying all the power dynamics amid which we were operating. Failing and showing vulnerabilities did not seem welcome within the institution where I have been doing my research nor within the frameworks of the subsidies we applied for.

Within the framework of my research and the funding bodies I worked under, I have found little room to question the impact of the two situations I will write about in this text. There is an understanding that we should work on inclusion, diversity and anti-racist ethics, but as soon as we exclude certain people in order to start to do this work, we get told that we are not being inclusive enough. Our Braver Spaces code of conduct is widely celebrated, shared and copied, but I have been met with very few comments that question or try to challenge or criticise some of the practices we implemented in a critical way, and this leaves me wondering whether I am part of the same system that keeps me tame and peaceful. I am left with an eerie feeling when I see violent institutions and organisations like the police also adopt these ‘solutions’, making clear that the efforts made to rebrand instead of replace oppressive systems is a strategic trend that values performing symbolic identity politics over actual change (Táiwò: 2022, 4–6).

Everyone is capable of harm. Trying to find ways of carefully inviting the people who were interested in joining Braver Spaces and ultimately forming the group was not easy and is still very much an ongoing process. It’s even more difficult to try and write about this process here. I would like to try by taking the example of whiteness as a power dynamic, societal construct and privilege that shaped some moments throughout the

*taking place since July 2023, when we held our second Braver Spaces Summer School. In many ways, we were able to achieve some of our goals, we were able to host individuals from Germany, Ethiopia, England and Palestine at Globe Aroma.<sup>D</sup> Not to mention the many racialised and queer individuals who came from Belgium and the Netherlands. New meetings, new friendships arose. But, on the other hand, things unfolded in ways that were challenging and unexpected. For example, the hostel we booked was too hot and noisy ... and our code of conduct triggered some participants in negative ways. Some did not find it useful to always address the issue of pronouns, as the code of conduct suggested, and felt it became forced and did not sit right with their own ethical backgrounds for cultural and / or religious reasons. One of the first sessions held on the week of the main programme upset some and made them feel pushed to share personal traumas and were exposed in the process. By the end of the main programme week, two participants who came from England decided to return home, instead of participating in the proposed weekend of rest and writing in the Limburg countryside. Their reason for leaving early had in part to do with being tired after seven days in Belgium.*

*This being tired became a recurring theme, because some of us who organised were also exhausted. This led, months later, to the cancellation of the 2024 edition of the Summer School. As an alternative, together with and in agreement with my colleague and collaborator, we decided to organise a weekend of rest in the Dutch countryside. We met in October of 2023 to speak with Dutch collaborators about the weekend and I was off and running. This is a trait of mine, running (an ableist leaning) without sometimes slowing to really feel where others are. In the stead of others, I sometimes assume what those individuals need. Once they agree and consent, I do not do the very necessary work of returning to check in with them. A semi-tunnel visioned approach. A caring that at times does not result in care. Which can sometimes lead to frustrations. In fact, this caused the weekend of rest that finally took place in*

<sup>D</sup> Globe Aroma is an organisation in the centre of Brussels, known in recent years for its radical non-hegemonic decision to support migrant and refugee artists, especially women and gender non-binary folk.

process of creating Braver Spaces. Identity politics will be the end of us in the long run. At the beginning, we made a very blunt call to only spread the word among people who were not white, among people who were marginalised individuals, queer folks, and so on. A white woman from the UK had already been a participant in many sessions of the group thus far. During our discussions, some people hinted that to make the space safe, we should not have this white person in the weekly meetings. Most people who spoke up on this were newer people who did not have a connection of trust with this person. When abstracting this conversation to speculate about future moments within Braver Spaces, it became clear that there was a need to create safer space, which meant that for some sessions we had to exclude certain individuals based on particular intersections of identity, and whiteness was one of them. This was a very tough thing to do and, to me, it definitely did not feel right to exclude her, since I knew her and had established a deeper connection that made me feel safe with her. Others shared a similar feeling, though most expressed that it was a necessary step towards creating a safer space for people to share their lived experiences. When I told her the news she took it well and completely understood the situation. But there was this lingering feeling of excluding an ally / accomplice who was very valuable to the group.

This became the start of what we called the 'closed weekly meetings'. No white people allowed. What about half white? What about those who aren't white but carry whiteness within themselves? What does it even mean to be white? How can we create sustainable models for safer spaces that accommodate diverse experiences and identities without perpetuating exclusionary practices?

I have carried these questions with me ever since we decided to implement this guideline. We made this decision in order to create

*May of 2024 to take shape, with me doing most of the work, and it led to a spectacular failure. This included, like the previous summer, two participants leaving, but instead of leaving after seven days, they left after less than 24 hours of a weekend that was just under 48 hours in total. I was blamed for the failure by some of the individuals present, and I spent the week after licking my wounds. 'How could I have failed again... I need to give up on doing work with others...' A bit dramatic, but this was part of the thoughts and process.*

*Fortunately, since that weekend, many conversations have been had. One of them, which really helped me put things into perspective, was one with a collaborator in the Netherlands who knows me well. The individual said some hard things, confronting but essential. In short, that I need to stop entering spaces and transforming them in negative ways because of the burden I still carry from my past of working in community. I need to stop making myself small and trying to invisibilise myself in racialised and queer spaces. This struck a chord, and, while it was hard to hear, it helped to provide the perspective that I was missing. In actuality, I felt in a strange way as if I was being seen. I was being seen, but the challenge now is that I need to change being seen in that way. I need to find ways to enter spaces, take up space in ways that are genuine. Because by trying to not take up space and trying to be the go-getter and doing (sacrificing) things for others, I am actually taking up a lot of space.*

*Thankfully, a month after that weekend, we were afforded a week-long residency in Amsterdam. This residency focused on rest and anti- or post-work, with a consideration of immigrant, racialised and class realities within the Low Countries context.<sup>E</sup> Possibly due to the time we had, and mainly because of the fact that my collaborator in Amsterdam — linked to Black Speaks Back and the University of Amsterdam — did a lot of the logistics like ordering food, reaching out to people and coming up with concepts for activities,*

<sup>E</sup> We wanted this to be a week where we could tap into our own knowledge around what it means to work and rest. From the very personal to the political. There was an understanding that we were all in different places around these topics. While some had an anti-work and post-work framing, others emphasised the utilitarian need for work, as a way to support families or care for others, for example. While still others saw work as a way to achieve certain personal goals that might require capital. Rest was also understood differently by all of us. Some cannot come to rest, while others can and need more rest to recover from stress and being overworked.

a group where we can have part of our identities be the starting point of a conversation, or simply the thing that unites us without really having to justify why we experience certain things differently than others with different intersectional identities. Since we departed mostly from lived experiences, it felt safe at times to be able to share things without the presence of this white gaze. We were able to contribute to our collective knowledge by sharing our experiences and skills with each other in group situations. Personal networks were created around common fields of interest. This allowed for lasting relationships that promoted long-term exchange. This is not to conclude that removing people who are white from your group will create the same experience, rather it was the awareness of this whiteness that allowed us to tread more carefully in conversations. Whiteness is of course present within us all, myself included, so being able to recognise this was, in a way, what brought us closer together and helped to create a deeper understanding of ourselves and how we might navigate the space we gathered in.

Departing from one of the pillars of disability justice — ‘COLLECTIVE LIBERATION: No body or mind can be left behind’ — we still created occasions where everyone was welcomed.<sup>2</sup> We looked at ways in which different levels of safety were guaranteed and communicated about. We tried to find a balance of having vulnerable and open moments in addition to the closed and safer moments we organised. Going back to the person we kept out of the closed gatherings, she was still able to be involved in the open events we organised. As we continue this journey, the challenge remains: how do we ensure that the spaces we create are both inclusive and brave, fostering genuine dialogue and growth without falling into the traps of exclusion and division? How can we uphold the values of openness and bravery while protecting the vulnerable and marginalised? These are big questions that

*the week felt as if it was better received. For starters, no one left after the first 24 hours. And while there were comments about how to improve, most of the feedback was generally positive. Some of the participants showed gratitude for the way we held space, with two dinners, two days apart from each other, a creative activity, and most importantly a space they could use as needed, with supplies and snacks provided. Besides that, there was no requirement to be present or engage in any other activities than the ones listed above. This week reminded us that when we hold spaces, we have to build trust with those who use the spaces, and those users need to know we will not intentionally hurt or harm them or other people. Though harm can be done in some of the spaces we hold, it is also our responsibility to work with and through that harm.*

<sup>2</sup> Berne, P. (2015, September 17). *10 Principles of Disability Justice*. Sins Invalid. <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice>

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will have different answers depending on context. What I found is that you cannot be brave all the time, and often we will need to retreat into a safer space, to be closer to like-minded people and be in touch with tender solidarity. This practice recharges us, so that we are able to step back into braver spaces that demand of us tremendous courage.

As a facilitator in all of these processes, I find myself doubting the decisions we take all the time. I welcome critique, mistakes and being accountable and responsible for the things that happen. My only worry is how much of these try-outs become harmful and come at the expense of people's safety and well-being in Braver Spaces. How can we, as facilitators and artistic researchers within academic settings, balance the need for experimentation and growth in creating braver spaces while ensuring that these processes do not compromise the safety and well-being of the individuals involved? How do we move beyond collective guidelines to develop dynamic, responsive practices that prioritise the evolving needs and experiences of our communities?

I would like to demonstrate this with a specific example from our past summer school that took place in 2023. We took the practice of creating a code of conduct for the session to ensure that there were some guidelines established collectively at the beginning of the session.<sup>3</sup> We did the work of sending the code of conduct beforehand to participants, and we started the summer school by taking some time together to read it, comment on it, edit it and potentially discuss points that people might not fully agree on. There were no objections, no comments, no notes. As the week went by, we noticed that two participants were absent, distant and barely participated in the activities. After talking with them, it became clear that our method of asking participants to follow these guidelines was flawed, as it created an environment where disagreement

<sup>3</sup> *Braver Spaces code of conduct*, <https://pad.constantvzw.org/p/codeofconduct-braver>. The code also included an extra field where participants could comment, take notes or add more guidelines.

was highly visible, exposing those who disagreed in the room to the others. A code of conduct is not only something that sets guidelines for a specific time and space, it also imposes certain expectations. We expect everyone involved to know and understand what we are proposing, yet we forget that when dealing with inclusive practices, the language we use can become quite complex and rigid. This rigidity can stifle the very openness and fluidity we aim to cultivate.

From this process, I learned that it is not enough to create a code of conduct; we need a framework around it, resources to help people understand better what is at stake, direct actions that are paired with the guidelines to bring forward the importance of navigating (micro-)aggressions and consistency to avoid performative signalling. A code of conduct should not be created to protect the collective's image or to show that we are working on diversity, safety, inclusion, and so on, but should prioritise real change in how we relate to each other. This should in turn allow us to move away from a safer space and enter a braver space, where we try to navigate difficult conversations, take risks and face up to any challenges.

I have shared two experiences that made me realise as a facilitator how difficult and nuanced small gestures toward inclusion can be in their implementation. Participating in braver spaces is a practice of constantly failing, giving all you have and exhausting yourself beyond measure — out of passion. A passion for disability justice, a passion to work against the status quo without an established framework and, realising, quite frankly, that we should never have one. It is a practice that constantly transforms and adapts, a practice that highly depends on the context in which it wants to grow. There are thicker threads of matter that bind us together: our willingness to keep tender solidarity alive, a need to gather and heal, listen and revolt in order to achieve our liberation from the oppressive

systems that we live under. The reality is, that all these things I try to highlight in these last few paragraphs are almost impossible to achieve under the current circumstances and with the financial realities we face. It will take more than one collective, more than one generation to get there.

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# MONA HEDAYATI

## *Reverb-Resonate: The Undercurrents*

from your home?’, ‘how often do you go back?’ Certain statements are likewise provocative, such as ‘it must be terrible to watch what’s going on in your country from a distance’, ‘I can’t imagine being away from my family’, ‘I’m sure your family is proud of you’, or, the worst, ‘I’m sure a day will come when you can go back’. But what if I don’t want to go back? What if I can’t find my home just by going back? And what if I will never feel lucky to have gotten away?

This contribution is a reflection on my doctoral research project *Reverb-Resonate: Sounding the Affective Frequencies of Migration*, which is currently in its final year. It details the performative experiments I've carried out, as well as their impetus, their generative potential and failure, and, perhaps more importantly, the loops of research and creation that inform one another. The text describes the conceptual and technical framework of my doctoral project and shares some of the iterative work and experiments developed during the second and third year of my research. It also looks ahead to the third and final iteration, that was still in the making process at the time this reflection text was written.

پرده اول

As a new immigrant I was asked by a new friend if I felt lucky that I’d gotten away. I couldn’t answer that good-intentioned question, as I couldn’t express how I felt: certainly not lucky, but I didn’t know what to say instead. I couldn’t find the right words and I felt whatever I’d say would be downplaying the insurgence that’s going on in my body: the messiness of what I sense that then boils down to my discomfort. I’d get hot and drenched in sweat, and then cold with numb fingers; I’d feel like eating but not make it past a single bite. But saying this is still discounting the intensity, the granularity, the vibrance and the proliferation of these sensations, so I’ll stop right here.

پرده دوم

I got to know about biosensors when I started thinking about my research project. I learned about their operation: the fact that they can measure the neurophysiological rhythms of the body and these measurement windows, compared across windows of time, can indicate your stress response. I found biosensors as an entry point into what’s going on in the body that is under stress. But quickly I also learned that these sensors are used as part of a toolset of a nascent field called affective computing that claims to make emotional meaning out of these measurements, as if emotions are neat objects of analysis that can be quantified and classified. I was struck by how little critique on the field is out there and how these emotional declarations through automated processes are taken seriously. I wanted to subvert the presumed transparency of this technical workflow but at the same time leverage it to transform the neurophysiological data attached to the intensity of sensory responses in my body. So, when I was conceptualising the project, I picked biosensors because I wanted to build an imaginary around them.<sup>1</sup> The project was also a way for me to move away from image-making and a reliance on linguistic weight for communication, two common pathways used to communicate experiences of migration both within the realm of artistic practice and outside. My presumption in doing this project was that these ways of communicating leave out what matters in the experience: ‘obscurities’ that language and image, as cognitive

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to an individual’s power of imagination, as a commonplace understanding in sociology and anthropology, ‘imaginary’ refers to a set of cultural formations (including beliefs and values) that constitute a social reality.

I developed these performances as a response to my inability and my unwillingness to narrativise my lived experience in response to questions like the one I recalled at the beginning of this text. Added to this are other questions about immigration, such as ‘how do you feel about being an immigrant?’, ‘what kind of setting did you grow up in?’, ‘where is your family?’, ‘how do you feel about being separated

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The third iteration is yet to come, as I’m conceptualising it right now. In this one I strike a balance by walking the participants through the experience: there is the learning phase as the ‘onboarding’; the performance phase like the second performance set-up, but also a third phase as the ‘offboarding’; The idea for the new addition is to allow for the intensity of the performance to taper off before ‘ejecting’ the participants back into reality. I’m hoping that this new phase will withhold the intensity and absorb the shock of sharp ending. I want to find out if serving traditional drinks, which carry the cultural connotation of migration, can serve as an act of hospitality and gratitude towards those taking part in my intimate performance. I also wonder if incorporating a sensory ethnographic exercise, like discussing prominent or subtle sensations experienced during the performance, can make the experience more cohesive.

It’s you and the biosensor. You wear it, you learn how it operates through observing the simple visualisation and sonification of the biosignals. This time you watch the footage yourself and you see how your responses are registered in the sound. You pass the wristband around to others as the sound reflects the affective tone. You become me and I become you — as the audience and you as the performer. You feel the intensity in the room as it builds. Some turn their faces away from the footage. You see slow-motion, backward and forward movements that convey violence, but the images are not sharp or clear and reveal no identifiable details: they are manipulated so that you can’t make a clear-cut story in your head. You have no idea what is going on, but you can detect the violence. The intensity of the sound makes the uncanny-ness of the images bolder. Some of you don’t take the wristband and just watch. Some of you leave the room. The relatability here seems to be working. However, from some of the remarks I received, and observing participants’ reactions, I realise that there is a disorientation and an almost cruel disconnect after the performance ends.

separation felt counter-intuitive. I realised that emphasising the centrality and the subjective experience of the performer was not the kind of situation that can build relatability. For the discomfort to truly resonate, a different approach would be required.

You see me as the performer and the biosensors as a wristband that I wear. I watch videos of political protests in Iran to induce a stress response in myself, and you hear a sound that fills up the room as it reflects my biosignals. Performing this several times taught me that something wasn’t working for me. There was too much distance: I was in my performer bubble and the audience in theirs. The connection that I was hoping to build was not working. The sound was effective, and the audience was affected by it, but the goal was not a sound performance: I wanted the audience to figure out the imaginary I built around the biosensor registering my stress response and the sound being reflective of that. If the goal was to create relatability, the performer-audience

Performance was the form of expression that drew me in, as I knew I wanted and I needed live events. It is the intensity in the live act and event, I realised, that could carry over the intensity I was looking for. I worked on two iterative concepts of performance:

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I grew up with music but also with noise. Noise is an inherent part of the life in Tehran as a city with a huge population and unending traffic jams. I remember being quite curious about the static radio noise. What were all these weird sounds that came out of the radio when my dad was trying to tune in to his favourite program? I loved the oddity of them as a small child. I also remember the alarm on the radio in the middle of the night when it would go off. A fighter coming into the radar detection zone would trigger the alarm, signalling that a bomb may fall in the vicinity. We would run to the basement and the sound would disappear. We had to wait for another announcement that declared it was safe to go back up. I know the affectivity of sound quite viscerally and the vulnerability we have as humans to sound; you can shut your eyes but not your ears. You can try blocking your ears, but you are always susceptible to hearing. Sound, then, was a natural decision for me as the medium to work with. The neurophysiological data are transformed into sound: biosignals — signals representing my neurophysiological activities — are transformed into acoustic signals: the transformation of one waveform to another. I use the same technical workflow used in affective computing — biosensors, the systematic capture of biosignals and normalisation of sensor data — but instead of proposing to make emotional meaning out of the data collected, I transform it into sound, such that the objectivity and pragmatic value of data vanishes into thin air.

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pathways of communication, leave behind. I was instead interested in capturing the granularity of what these experiences induce in the body.





ROBIN VANBESIEN  
*Ciné Place-Making—hold on to her*

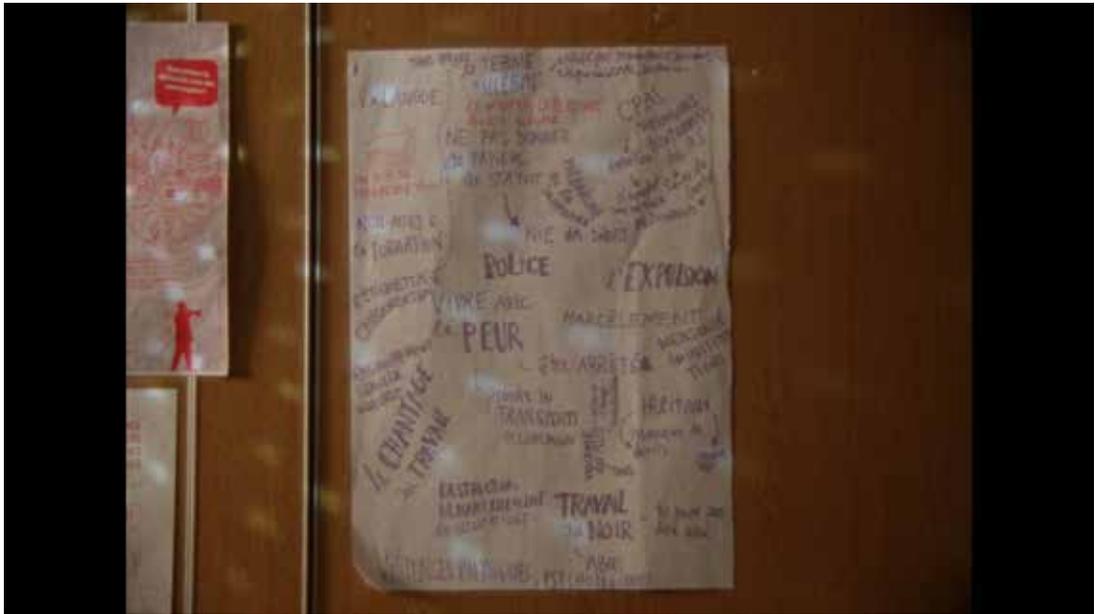
**My artistic doctoral study, *Ciné Place-Making*, unearths various cinematic approaches to engaging with situated practices of place-making. How can cinema offer ways to acknowledge, reclaim, reassemble, rehearse and redistribute the social collective body and sensory imagination of such practices? How do we create a cinema that arises from the reassembly and recreation with assemblers who speak and act in close proximity to these situated practices of place-making? And how can we contribute to the ongoing redistribution of this kind of cinema?**

**This essay focuses on the feature film *hold on to her* (2024, 80'), which traces a lived social infrastructure of care, solidarity and struggle, holding the state and police accountable for recent acts of violence in the context of migration border control in Belgium. The essay uncovers the reasons, underlying concepts and methodology of the film, with abolition, collective self-organisation and rehearsal at its core. Above all, the film is an invitation — an invitation to attune ourselves to a collective hearing, an invitation to rehearse, together, the capacity to hold transformation.**



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) by Robin Vanbesien.

We don't make places from nothing. Situated practices of place-making are those practices — always collectively lived — that emerge when people challenge the normative and weaponised presumption that territory and liberation can be easily divided and restricted through sales, documents or walls. These practices transpire when people aim to unfix and stretch the places to which they are involuntarily assigned, as a consequence of long histories of colonialism, modern capitalist extraction and authoritarianism; when people undo violent processes and oppressive infrastructures and make freedom provisionally, imperatively; when people combine consciousness and the capacity to make where they are into places they wish to be. Place-making goes back to the long tradition of abolition: the creative work of collective self-organisation that deals not only with the act of erasing and tearing something down, but also concerns — if not primarily — desiring, figuring out and creating a different here and now (Gilmore, 2022).



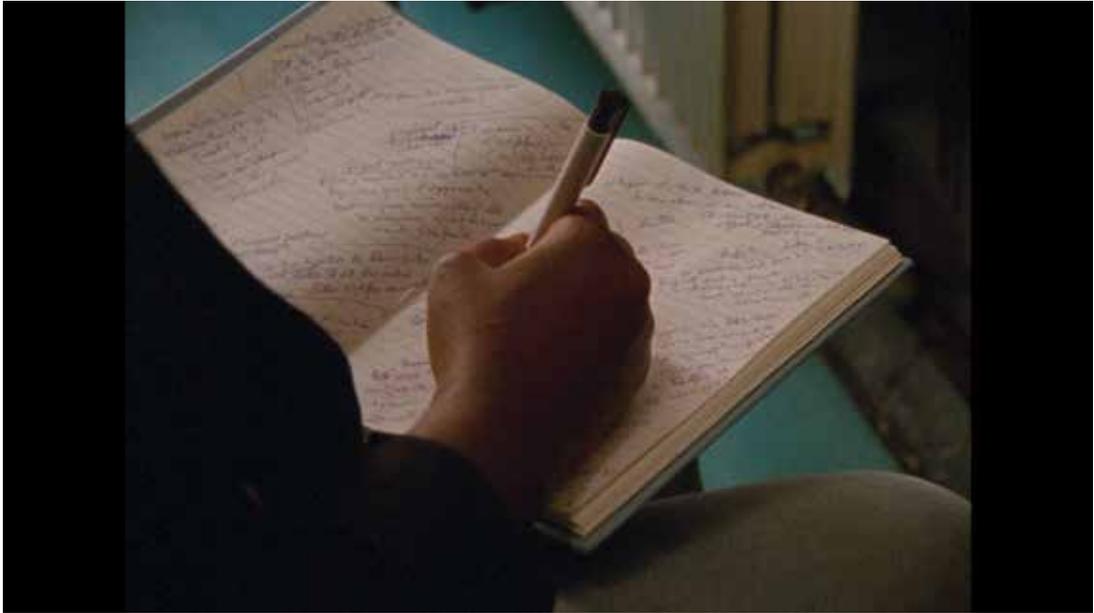
Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

Abolition starts from the notion that freedom is a place. Abolition is presence, and therefore it is also life in rehearsal. And if, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, ‘abolition is life in rehearsal,’ then the assembly of the film must start with rehearsing. Who is already holding you? Who is already caring for you? Who is already struggling for you? My study of place-making in cinema is guided by the principle of ongoing rehearsal. We add our rehearsals to those already underway; we rehearse to create space for others to join us. Rehearsals for emancipation, transformation and liberation. Rehearsals to build capacity begin with the refusal to speak in the language and terms of dominant scenes of representation. Not to take power, but to *make* power requires a reorientation in listening, seeing and feeling. It requires a reorientation to a sensuous knowledge that doesn’t fully dissolve into the violent and discriminatory dominant symbolic order, yet persists with undeniable presence. This reorientation requires rehearsal.



On the set of *hold on to her* (2024) with Ahmed Rzgar, Thierno Dia and Diren Agbaba. Image © Steven Dhoedt.

Taking all of this into account, cinema, for me, is both a method and a medium of rehearsing these practices of place-making, which I have termed *ciné place-making*. When I consider cinema as a method of rehearsing place-making, it centres around moments when assembly and cinema converge: cinema as an assembly. What I've termed *solidarity poiesis* in the past refers to different assemblers coming together to create solidarity on their own terms — not by adopting an existing idea of solidarity, but by inventing it in their own way, in a situated way, processing it experientially for themselves (Vanbesien, 2017). Cinema is integral to this process of inventing or creating solidarity — it helps rehearse it. Conversely, the filmmakers or assemblers explore and reshape what cinema's conditions and tools can be, based on the struggles of their practices and their imagination in relation to place-making.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

Secondly, when we think of cinema as a medium for rehearsing place-making, the notion of world-building comes into play. This refers to the way cinema, as a medium, can create an immersive, sometimes fictional, universe — through its capacity for make-believe. In this sense, cinema can help imagine, speculate and test the transformation of the world as desired by autonomous networks, collectives or organisations, by showing and making us feel the presence of place-making. Cinema, in what it presents, can allow alternative social connections to emerge instead of merely reinforcing dominant meanings and subjectivities. It can reorient how we listen, see and value what is precious.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

The film *hold on to her* (2024, 80') traces a lived social infrastructure of care, solidarity and struggle, demanding accountability for a recent case of police and state violence in the context of migration border control in Belgium. Mawda Shawri — daughter of Phrast and Shamden, sister of Hama — was two years old in 2018 when she was shot dead by a Belgian police officer during a migration border control on a Belgian central highway. In 2023, over 40 activists — residents both documented and undocumented — assembled before the camera at the headquarters of the Brussels organisation La Voix des Sans Papiers ('The voice of the undocumented') to stage a collective hearing, where documents from and reactions to Mawda's case were presented.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Henriette Essami-Khullot.

*hold on to her* opens with the words of Henriette Essami-Khullot, who, as an undocumented activist herself, is a spokesperson for Comité des Femmes Sans-Papiers, which is affiliated to La Voix des Sans Papiers. She tells us that when she heard about Mawda's death, she immediately thought that the police 'will get away with it.' And as the film progresses, we learn that the police—unsurprisingly—do get away with it, confirming what she already knew: justice is not possible within the confines of the current legal system.

There is an important convergence between the struggles of undocumented activists and the family of Mawda. Undocumented activists, due to the daily precarity and criminalisation they endure, live perpetually endangered lives in the same necropolitical landscape as Mawda's family. In my initial conversations with undocumented activists such as Henriette, Aïsta Bah, Thierno Dia and Modou Ndiaye, I learned that they recognise the apparent impossibility of addressing the causes of systemic racialised violence within dominant frameworks. However, for them, this is not an impasse but an invitation to collective exploration, imagination and rehearsal.

It is in this space—between the actual events and the official narrative, and in the refusal of this narrative—that undocumented activists, along with other allies such as lawyers and journalists, are striving to create a space for social justice. And so, in *hold on to her*, my objective was to create a cinematic space that holds what these activists are already holding. My objective was to explore how the power of cinema can serve politically by extending and amplifying the transformative world-building that they achieve together through the act of holding.



On the set of *hold on to her* (2024) with Marcus Bergner, Ahmed Rzgar and Thierno Dia. Image © Steven Dhoedt.

My research for the film began in 2021 with the question of how to convey the collective imaginary of the broader intersectional solidarity around the case. It was crucial for me to ensure that the dialogues and words in the film came directly from the activists, preserving the integrity of their voices, positions and perspectives. To this end, I held conversations and meetings with about twenty people who were involved in these actions or identified with the case, including documented and undocumented activists, lawyers, journalists and other concerned people. The dialogues you hear in the film are either original excerpts from these conversations or based on them. For rerecordings, I invited other activists to participate, further widening the circle of collaboration on the film.

After that, I wanted to assemble the multiplicity of solidarity initiatives in a fictional forum, where the dialogues would be acted out on camera by a cast of activists.

I felt it was crucial to refrain from a strict documentary approach, as such a collective imaginary should be able to transcend the situatedness of this case. Artistically, this would also allow for a more precise photographic staging of the activists. Eventually, the forum filmed in the summer of 2023 at the assembly room of La Voix des Sans Papiers was composed of the people who had given the original testimonies together with the people who had revoiced some of the original statements. Then there was the ensemble that created the vocal poetry for the film and a large group of people — represented in the film as ‘listeners’ — who are mostly undocumented activists from the Brussels network of La Voix des Sans Papiers.



On the set of *hold on to her* (2024) with Diren Agbaba, Robin Vanbesien and Ahmed Rzgar. Image © Steven Dhoedt.

With this working method, I wanted to emphasise how cinema can serve as a space for collaboration with grassroots emancipatory work, exploring forms of social reassembly (both in front of and behind the camera) that rehearse the capacity to collectively transform a situation. My personal position in this broad coalition of activists is that of an accomplice. Their political interventions and actions compelled me to respond — I felt interpellated — and so I joined them. In doing so, I bartered my privileged position as a researcher and professional artist, making it useful for a struggle I felt part of. I adopted the situated knowledge of the activists as a reference point while collaborating with them, fully aware that my institutional and professional affiliation could facilitate the redistribution of this solidarity imaginary in more symbolic circles.

I began by listening, asking questions and co-elaborating the collective imaginary that the activists had assembled, translating and transmuting it into an audiovisual creation. Here, I engaged with others as part of an encounter that was continuously resumed, regenerated, retrieved and reinvented. This assembly was marked by non-sovereign relationality: the relationships were not worked out in advance. The differences and asymmetries resulting from varying structural and systemic positions acted as a generative factor, with the mutual understanding that acknowledging these differences would help us find ways to assemble around our shared rage, ultimately directing us toward the root causes. Respecting our unsettled intersectional differences is the first step in the long journey toward mutual trust and, eventually, comradeship in a common struggle.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Apollinaire Lesso, Elli Vassalou, Ahmed Refaat, Yuksel Çilingir and Angele Ngado-Tshunza.

The assemblers of the film (process) have the capacity to ‘speak nearby’ the solidarity activism they are part of, in the way filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha explores this notion: ‘a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it’ (Chen, 1992). The way these assemblers speak nearby the infrastructure of care and struggle they contribute to consequently becomes a guide or a set of instructions on how I, as a filmmaker, can approach their contributions and incorporate them in my film projects. As Minh-ha explains: ‘The first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you’re very close to your subject, you’re also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them’ (Balsom, 2018).



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Yun Tien Chu and Angele Ngado-Tshunza.

I organised the collective hearing in the film as a people’s tribunal, where the attention is directed at the misconduct and violence of the police and authorities. The timeline of events marking this deadly Channel crossing is reconstructed through multiple testimonies, followed by various reflections on the systemic causes and possible ways of resisting and undoing them.

It is not science or any positivist method that governs the words of the people in the tribunal; rather, they are guided by feelings of solidarity and fellowship. This tribunal expands the traditional framework within which a court allows ‘legally relevant’ evidence. It rejects the reproduction of narrow forensic logic to centre language and emotions often disregarded by standard legal procedure. These feelings enable a more exploratory search for acknowledgment, particularly through the collective act of listening, which is foregrounded here as an important method of agency. Listening intensifies our sense of the present, stretching spatial and temporal boundaries with attentiveness, which is inherently slow work. This act of attention is neither stable nor ideal; it often drifts, falls behind and is strained by what it hears, revealing our own limits. In doing so, it also opens up an extremely important sense of the not-yet — for what remains to be said. As such, listening offers a deep intervention precisely within scenes of injustice by reconfiguring what we understand as presence and visibility, as the sensible (LaBelle, 2020).



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Lubnan Al-Wazny, Mirra Markhaëva, Khaled Zead, Naomi van Kleef, Veroline Vanderbeek, Ahmed Rzgar and Thierno Dia.

The voices we hear, speak not so much to their hostile surroundings as to the collective to which they belong. Since their indifferent surroundings do not provide the framework for being heard, this is a necessary reorientation. The collective hearing provides a figuration of acoustics that helps navigate how we synchronise, attune, and align with those that already know. In listening to the testimonies concerning these cases, the listener works at figuring scenes of truth-making, support and transformation, enabling a process of building collective capacity for resistance that often extends beyond the apparent and the articulated. In these hearings, justice becomes grounded not as an abstraction, or as a rule book, but as a sensory landscape.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

This collective hearing is not so much a demonstration of evidence as it is a collective attunement in which presence is explored. Specifically, in relation to the crime scene — the E42 highway between Namur and Mons in Belgium — the film reveals this landscape in an opaque, poetic and sensory way. In doing so, it does not illustrate the scene of the crime, but rather gives presence to the image of the scene of the crime. As a result, it opens up the idea of a crime scene. The causes of this crime are not to be found in the crime scene — they are much broader and more systemic — so we have to open up the way we give it an image. Because what is the image of something as broad and pervasive as state violence?



Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

For the camerawork, the principle of ‘giving presence’ to the image was key. When filming the site of the crime, it was of central importance to first ask myself what it meant to revisit a highway that was often called a non-place, a place without memory. So, my first intuition was to explore with the cinematographer, Diren Agbaba, how we could try to capture on camera what it meant to be there, to just be present, to pay attention to the many visual details of life on and beside the highway, to defy it as a so-called non-place.

I myself started to film. I used analogue 8mm film, which corresponded to my intuition of exploring the image of the highway through poetic and opaque fragments. We quickly saw the potential of this cinematic approach, where the image gives presence — in opaque and poetic ways — while avoiding illustration. And so Diren and I began to explore how we could extrapolate this to the other sequences and scenes shot with a digital camera. This approach resulted in images that I consider to serve as a holding environment for the collective hearing. While these images can certainly be haunting, they also appeal to the necessity to undo this necropolitical landscape, to imagine other possible worlds within the same landscape.



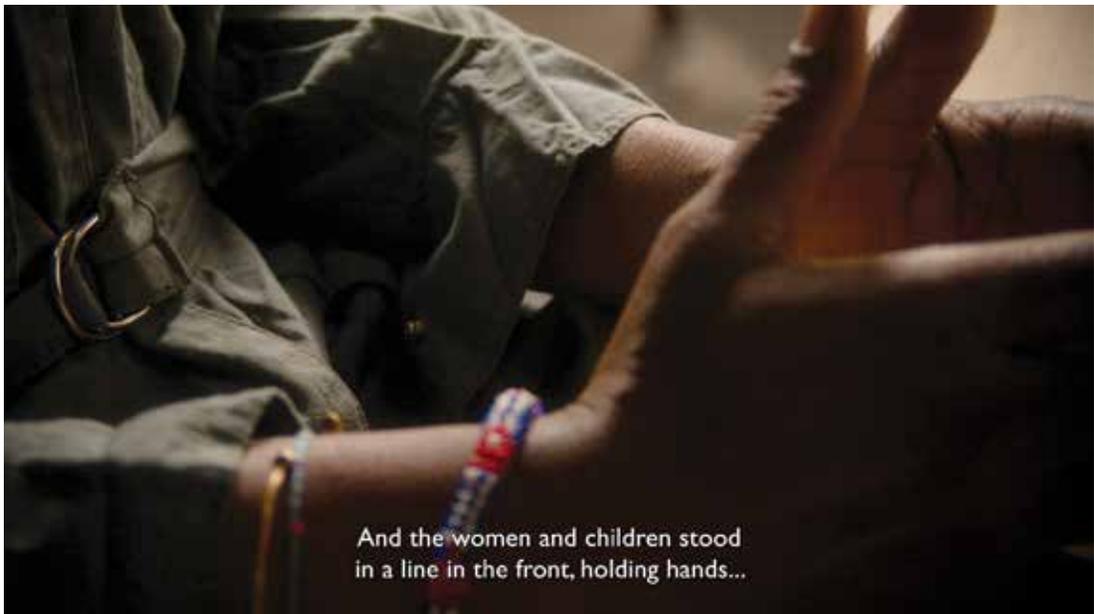
Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Naomi van Kleef, Thierno Dia and Aista Bah.

For the forum shoot, giving presence to the image meant trying to give a tactile, material, physical sense of the forum, while maintaining an elegant portrait of each person. This was achieved through a varied series of shots: close-ups, over-the-shoulder shots, parts of bodies — mostly hands — in an out-of-focus foreground, portraits of people with their eyes closed, and so on.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024).

In the editing process, it was crucial to preserve the given presence from the recording sessions. How to leave the space of representation open and let the sensory presence prevail? Taking Trinh T. Minh-ha's words as a guide here, I wanted to use 'speaking nearby' as a structuring principle for the editing process. Here it was essential to maintain what I call a 'non-indexical' approach. While the film moves between the assembly and the forensic site, the images of the highway between Namur and Mons should never function as a direct or obvious illustration of the reconstruction of the events of that evening. While the viewer can feel that we are at the crime scene, the opaque and the poetic should govern the visual impressions of this scene.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Lázara Rosell Albear.

Secondly, the forum is constructed in such a way in the edit that it doesn't feel like a documentary setting. Intentionally, we never see the speakers' mouths when they speak, leaving the connection between image and sound undefined and open, while maintaining the illusion of the scenes. Also, for most of the film, until at the very end, the spatial constellation of the forum appears in fragments. The viewer needs to construct the forum with their own imagination.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Mirra Markhaëva, Thierno Dia and Lázara Rosell Albear.

The dialogues in the film are interspersed with experimental vocal poetry. Marcus Bergner, Mahmoud Hamzeh Beshtawi, Mirra Markhaëva, Lázara Rosell Albear, Naomi van Kleef and Khaled Zead created the vocal music of *hold on to her*. In the working process of the vocal sound collective, the following elements were of importance: to explore the limits and unconventional use of one's own voice and language (including dialects); and to make collective compositions for each other — in playful improvised ways. The outcome is a social, lively and polyphonic sound that supports the imaginary space of the forum beyond articulated speech.

The vocal music of the film gives an embodied sound to feelings of grief, mourning and commemoration. In this context, it's important to point out how the starting point for this musical contribution to the film was a listening workshop at Aire du Bois de Gard (where Mawda died and where her parents, Phrast and Shamden, were arrested along with all the other occupants of the van). Given that the acoustic landscape of the site (which bears no visual traces of the horrifying events of that night), is entirely drowned out by the loud roaring sounds from the continuous heavy traffic on the highway, our collective sonic gestures were entirely ephemeral. It was absolutely a performance of collective hallucination, an entirely imaginary collective experience that, while it didn't make a concrete mark on the site itself, provided guidance when attuning together afterwards in the studio to continue the sonic work of memorial.

This collective, yet fragile and ephemeral performance functions as 'a social formation of a specific kind', pointing to lived processes that are widely experienced, but

'to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which ... they do not recognize.' But even at the threshold of form and visibility, such social performance 'does not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before [it] exert[s] palpable pressures ... on experience and on action' (Williams, 1977). In conclusion, this performance succeeds in invoking a necessary reorientation in listening, seeing and feeling, as part of life in rehearsal.



Still from *hold on to her* (2024) with Henriette Essami-Khaullot.

What do we do to defend this cause?  
How do we resist?  
How do we take a stand?  
How do we take back our rights?  
How do we continue our struggle?  
In other words, how can we bring change?

What can cause us to feel interpellated by these last words of Henriette in the film is everything that precedes her words, everything we learned and felt about the case (and its causes) during the film. Henriette's call has been anticipated and rehearsed throughout the entire space-time continuum of the collective hearing in the film. Henriette's call also continues to interpellate me. It did so when she said those words during one of the first conversations we had, early on in the development of the film, and it continues to do so in the sense that I can't shake it; it continues to guide my practice of *ciné place-making*.

Henriette's call thus invites us to build capacity for an unbound infrastructure of care, solidarity and struggle. When staying with Mawda's case, we are invited to stay with Henriette's call: its relational *ciné geographies*, its transpositions and its parallel distribution circuits, so that it can contribute to the elaboration of existing situated practices of place-making.

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VIỆT VŨ

*Film Censorship in Vietnam: A Conflict of Sociocultural and National Identity Re-Coding*

**My PhD research revolves around film censorship in Vietnam since the early 2000s, with the emergence of a local film market and a new independent filmmaking scene. My research is formulated from my point of view as a queer experimental documentary filmmaker who is part of the filmmaking community in Vietnam. Since my childhood, I have put up with constituent censorship of my homosexuality in a repressive Northern Vietnamese context of heterosexual normativity.<sup>1</sup> I came to the practice of filmmaking as a survival mechanism. However, when I made films, I experienced and observed the same repression towards artistic expression in my filmmaking community, especially among independent filmmakers. In this research, I use an auto-ethnographic methodology.<sup>2</sup> This means that I am both the researcher and one part of the subject of my research. In order to understand the situation in Vietnam deeply, I trace censorship as a process from when it is constitutively constructed to when it is officially written into law. I intentionally examine how governmental censorship reflects any profound changes at the foundational level of Vietnamese society.**

1 'Constituent censorship is a diffuse, omnipresent phenomenon in which a host of actors (including impersonal, structural conditions) function as effective censors. These "structural" forms of censorship may be based upon the effects of ingrained cultural languages and grammars, other forms of impersonal boundaries on acceptability inside the society, or internal construction of the market economy.' (Bunn, 2015)

2 Auto-ethnography is the study of a social group, setting, or culture of which one is a part, integrated with one's relational and inward experiences. The author incorporates the 'I' into research and writing, yet analyses the self as if studying an 'other' (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000).

In this article, I am going to briefly summarise the history of film censorship in Vietnam as well as give an overview on the situation since the early 2000s. I will subsequently analyse four specific films that have been made since the early 2000s as case studies of how film censorship reflects foundational changes in Vietnamese society.

Film censorship has existed in Vietnam since the founding of the Northern government in 1954. Since the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has been led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, which applied nationwide censorship. The first law that institutionalised film censorship, the Vietnamese Cinema Law, was born in 2006, and the second in 2023. According to the process outlined in these laws, any film or work of art intended to be released, shown or disseminated on any platform must be approved by the six Central Film Approval councils (operating under Vietnam's Cinema Department). These six councils, each consisting of at least nine members, are responsible for specific categories: fiction and genre-mixing feature films, scripts of feature-length movies, documentary feature films, scripts of documentary films, animation films and short films. Censorship in Vietnam has two forms: pre-inspection and post-inspection. Pre-inspection applies to those projects funded by the state or in cooperation with foreign countries. For these film projects, the filmmaker needs to submit the script to the relevant council, and it must be approved before the filming process begins. For post-inspection, when a film is completed, the producer needs to submit the final film for approval before it is licensed or shown anywhere, whether inside or outside Vietnam. According to the law on film dissemination in Vietnam, when a film produced by a Vietnamese crew is banned from being shown, it is not only banned from being shown inside Vietnam but all over the world, regardless of platform or purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Through textual and film analysis, observation of and engagement in the contemporary film scene and more than 30 in-depth interviews with local filmmakers and industry professionals that I conducted on two different fieldtrips in 2023 and 2024, it seems to me that all filmmakers making films in Vietnam have faced censorship, ranging from self-censorship to severe regulatory punishment. Depictions of violence, sex, nudity, queer people, minors, impoverished slums or anything that could be labelled as 'undermining national moral values' is censored, banned or reprimanded. Sociopolitical narratives about independent journalism, activism, democracy, freedom of speech, land repossession, or military or governmental corruption will face the most severe punishment. The threat of punishment has led most filmmakers to self-censor and not touch socially sensitive themes in their films. But it is not only the works of filmmakers that are being censored, the activities of producers and film centres are also heavily monitored. The police are tasked with visiting the set of any film with international co-production to supervise the shoot and ensure it proceeds according to a pre-approved script. The police are also authorised to visit, without notice, any film centre or club to monitor what they

<sup>3</sup> Film censorship in Vietnam is remarkably different before and after the early 2000s, since the emergence of a local film market and a new independent filmmaking scene. Before 2000, Vietnamese cinema was controlled by the government through state subsidies. Hence, film censorship was carried out through the pre-inspection mechanism. Since the early 2000s, with the post-inspection mechanism being applied, independent cinema often makes headlines for being heralded at international film festivals while also encountering censorship in Vietnam.

screen. In 2019, Hanoi Doclab, a documentary and experimental film centre where I used to practice, was raided by police for showing a documentary related to the 2019–20 protests in Hong Kong.

Deep down, the current situation of film censorship in Vietnam reflects a fierce battle over Vietnamese sociocultural and national identity in an era of globalisation. For the past two decades, a wave of independent arthouse movies made by a new generation of local filmmakers have challenged the traditional moral and social values interwoven with the national identity of the country that has been constructed through propaganda by the socialist government. Because these filmmakers challenge or try to re-code aspects of identity through filmmaking, their movies meet with local censorship by both government institutions and Vietnamese society. From within this context, I am going to analyse several notable Vietnamese independent films as case studies: *Taste* (dir. Le Bao, 2021), *Rom* (dir. Tran Dung Thanh Huy, 2019), *KFC* (dir. Le Binh Giang, 2017), and *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* (dir. Phan Dang Di, 2010).

### Case Studies

*Bi, Don't Be Afraid* (dir. Phan Dang Di, 2010) and *KFC* (dir. Le Binh Giang, 2017)

*Bi, Don't Be Afraid* was made with funds from international film festivals such as World Cinema Fund (Germany), CNC (France) and others. The film portrays a dysfunctional urban Vietnamese family with qualities that are completely contradictory to the expected moral norms of society. Instead of telling the story of a conventional family, in which a wife is supposed to act shyly and discreetly in the bedroom, the wife in this film is portrayed as the one who actively seeks sex with her husband. When this is not enough for her, she even satisfies herself while taking care of her sick father-in-law. Moreover, instead of portraying a respected and moral figure as the standard, central image of a teacher in a Confucian society, the film portrays a female teacher who is full of sexual desires and demands. At one point in the film, she ventures outdoors and peeps at the penis of her young student peeing in the rain. These aspects in the film that break down and challenge moral values, especially regarding standards forced on female-identified people, are attempts to question Vietnamese cultural identity. The most explicit sex scenes, portraying the provocative gestures and behaviour of Vietnamese women, were censored by Vietnam's Cinema Department and sparked public outcry (Anh, 2011). At the same time, the way the film portrays Hanoi — the capital of Vietnam — was also the centre of public debate. For many Vietnamese people who grew up under the idealism of socialist communism, Hanoi should be the peaceful, romantic, poetic, harmonious heart of the nation. This identity trait has, in fact, been fabricated through national propaganda songs, television and media. Instead, *Bi, Don't*



*Be Afraid* portrays Hanoi as a dark, chaotic and pessimistic place in the middle of the transition to a market-place economy that dehumanises people.

Similarly to *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*, the film *KFC* presents a Hanoi that had never been depicted before on screen. This horror picture, which takes Hanoi as the central setting, tells several nightmarish urban anecdotes. It exposes a chaotic city that is full of violence and cannibalism perpetrated by young people who consume globally imported products such as KFC, Pepsi and Coca Cola. It was one of the first Vietnamese movies selected to be shown in the Midnight Horror category of the Rotterdam Film Festival. Cleverly, the director Le Binh Giang never submitted the film to the Central Film Approval councils and only showed it underground in Vietnam. While a student at Saigon Film School, his short film of the same title was banned from being shown by the school's teaching council and he could not graduate with the work. The main reason, according to what Giang's professor, Nguyen Vinh Son, told me during an interview in May 2024, was because it 'ignited unnecessary violence and chaos.'<sup>4</sup> The fact that this short film was banned reflects the norm in Vietnamese culture that stresses harmony, humility and meekness rather than explicit violence, which is promoted through Hollywood action movies. Such a norm is embedded through local proverbs such as '*Một điều nhin, chín điều lành*' (literally, 'A bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit').

***Rom*** (dir. Tran Dung Thanh Huy, 2019) and ***Taste*** (dir. Le Bao, 2021)

*Rom* is a drama-action movie that tells the story of an impoverished boy selling illegal lottery tickets in the hustle and bustle of contemporary Saigon. It portrays a massive illegal lottery among a population of residents waiting to be resettled into



new economic zones because their houses and lands are being taken by the state. *Rom* won best film in the New Currents Awards category for the first or second film by an Asian director at Busan International Film Festival in 2019. According to what the director shared in an interview with me in May 2024, it was almost banned from screening by the Central Film Approval councils. In order for the film to be released in Vietnamese theatres, the director was asked to cut out a number of details relating to under-age labour and land. The main reason for censorship, according to the director, was because the film touches the ‘sensitive’ topic of state land acquisition, which has sparked heated discussions in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Le Bao’s debut film *Taste* also created a wave of intense debate throughout Vietnam after it was banned in 2021 and then screened at the Berlin Film Festival without the approval of the Central Feature Film Approval Council. *Taste* tells the story of a 30-year-old Nigerian man who drifts into the slums of Saigon, is unemployed and lives with four unhappy, middle-aged Vietnamese women. In two-thirds of the film, the characters are presented naked, eating, cooking and having sex in a bare concrete house — a dystopian vision amidst the current contemporary political and social context of Vietnam. After the work won the Special Jury Prize in the Encounters category of the Berlin Film Festival in 2021, the production company was fined 35 million VND (approx. €1,264) for not having an approval license before being screened. The police investigated the film crew and demanded sanctions every time the producers tried to send the film to international film festivals.

The state-subsidised journalist Viet Van, a core member of the Central Feature Film Approval Council, claims that *Taste* depicts the ugly, the naked, the abject, and ends in a deadlock, leaving the audience helpless and frustrated (Van, 2021). According to him, a film is good only when it depicts positive progress as a shining

example for every citizen to follow. The multiple scenes in *Taste* where characters' genitals are visible in a direct and undisguised way are 'not suitable for Vietnamese culture and Asian culture in general' (Van, 2021).<sup>5</sup> He also argues that the film was banned because it presented an image of Vietnamese people (in this case he means Vietnamese women) who are disgraceful and pitiful, so it should not be popular anywhere, especially internationally.

As a way to avoid local censorship, the director and producer abandoned their ownership so that the film belonged exclusively to the Singaporean producer. However, when the film was bought and broadcast on the Mubi network, Vietnamese audiences continued to criticise the film and affirm that the ban was deserved, boycotting and insulting the film and its director. In one example, To Duc Quynh wrote a long post on his Facebook page asserting that *Taste* is cinematic trash and insulting those who supported the film as 'a bunch of superior crybabies.'<sup>6</sup> In the comment section of the post, hundreds of Facebook users affirmed that this movie seriously offended the image of Vietnamese women and 'depicts scenes that I guarantee do not appear in everyday life anywhere in the world.'<sup>7</sup> They called *Taste* a disguised porn film with zero aesthetic value. The filmmaker was personally insulted and verbally attacked, with people claiming that he deserved to be denounced, shunned and severely punished with violence.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, *Taste* was the first time a film explored the image and identities of impoverished and lower-class people living in slum areas of urban, globalising Vietnam. By depicting women as those living at the bottom of society, being naked, wrinkled and imperfect, the movie violates supposedly traditional moral customs, which stress that Vietnamese women should be gentle, modest and discreet. The film also tries to integrate a character of African origin into its portrait of Vietnamese identity. In my interpretation, the fact that the film was boycotted was in part a reaction by audiences of the depiction of both class-based suffering and a more expanded representation of Vietnamese identity.

### *Viet and Nam* (dir. Truong Minh Quy, 2024)

*Viet and Nam* is about two gay lovers named Viet and Nam. Before Nam pays people smugglers to get him to England, they both embark on a journey to find the body of Nam's father, who died in the Vietnam War. The movie was co-produced by international producers from eight countries. After the movie was banned, the Vietnamese production company involved in the co-production was removed from the credits so that it could be shown abroad, except in Vietnam. According to an official letter from Vietnam's Cinema Department, the issues were that the content and theme of the film portray 'a gloomy, deadlocked, and negative view' of the country and its people

<sup>5</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>6</sup> To Duc Quynh. (2021, September 26). Author's translation from Facebook post. <https://www.facebook.com/tifosi.hpo/posts/722029515859711>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Author's translation from comments section.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



(Wong, 2024). In the meantime, a wave of web users expressed their support of the ban for the reasons that: ‘The director calls the great patriotic national war against the imperialist U.S a “civil one”; Vietnam is a sacred word that can’t and should not be used for the title of a dark queer movie on illegal human trafficking. The movie mocks the political apparatus, in this film, Vietnam is no different from a chaotic country, leaving its people poor. Spread life-changing ideas through illegal human trafficking because the one in Vietnam is miserable.’<sup>9</sup> Even on an LGBT fan page, the moviegoer Le Minh Man wrote: ‘Gay movies shouldn’t be that dark and gloomy. Why do gay movies keep depicting homosexual people as those at the bottom of society and having tragic lives?’<sup>10</sup> Under another Facebook post, I read hundreds of comments criticising the movie, even personally attacking the director.<sup>11</sup>

*Viet and Nam* explicitly questions Vietnam’s national identity. This film is about the love of two Vietnamese boys, Viet and Nam, who work as coal miners. From the outset, the film reimagines national identity in the naming of the working-class gay lead characters and of the film itself: Viet and Nam. This naming strategy is a statement that the gay working class is Vietnam; Vietnam is the marginal thing or the marginal things are Vietnam. Although authorities try to deny it, *Viet and Nam* portrays Vietnam as a country that exports cheap labour. Or, rather, this is an impoverished country young people are forced to leave in search of money in the West, even if it may cost them their lives. In addition, the film questions the view of the history of the Vietnam War from the perspective of writer and director Truong Minh Quy, a filmmaker who was born in 1990 and grew up in Vietnam before migrating to Europe in 2019. The country’s official media propagates the idea that the Vietnam War was one of national defence, of liberating Vietnam from American imperialism — a view that is deeply engrained in many generations raised and educated in Vietnam. In contrast *Viet and Nam* calls that sanctified war a civil war.

<sup>9</sup> Author unidentified. (2024, May 9). [Comments section; author’s translation]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/share/uZEfAvEouPMZsUmT/>.

<sup>10</sup> Le Minh Man. (2024, May 11). [Author’s translation]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/share/32Un5Lcwmz2NYV4T/>.  
<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/share/32Un5Lcwmz2NYV4T/>.

The film was censored administratively and reviled by audiences precisely because of the layered ways it recodes Vietnamese national identity.

## Conclusion

As a filmmaker, I can draw two observations from this essay for myself and articulate one hope for the independent filmmaking community in general. Being aware of the deeper, social layer of film censorship makes me less singularly afraid of government film censorship imposed from authoritarian regimes. Even though the regulatory censorship looks scandalous on the surface — government-enforced bans on certain filmmakers, creating waves of attention and gossip — it is just the tip of the iceberg. Latent censorship on the social level in the form of cultural norms is no less scary, but it is often neglected in censorship scholarship. Examining constitutively constructed censorship shows the great influence of social norms toward filmmakers and other artists.

Living in a globalising world, writing about the censorship situation in Vietnam helps me better understand the concepts and practices of personal and collective identity. Rather than asking what identity is or what Vietnamese identity means for myself personally as a Vietnamese person living in a displaced situation in Europe, I looked at the process by which identity is formed. This involves understanding how it is constructed in discursive activities. I understand Vietnamese identity as a process that is continuously practiced and is constructed in the everyday. This helps me to find my own anchor and become more assertive with my own position as a global citizen who resides in two worlds — Asia and Europe. Rather than clinging to a vague but static notion of my own ‘Vietnamese identity’, I can intervene to actively construct my own identity as a human being living in a constantly changing world.

Last but not least, by tracking the film material that is trimmed, erased, deleted or banned, my research hopes to reveal the invisible elements of such a place as Vietnam, and open a porthole into a turbulent culture and society experiencing globalisation. In that way, it may help the filmmakers, especially independent ones (including myself), become more aware of what is behind and beyond regulatory censorship, thus becoming braver in what we portray in our films and also calmer when encountering regulatory censorship. Because films, especially the ones outside the gigantic Hollywood system, are not only market products. Profound films that question fundamental issues are always authentic windows that enable audiences to look at society and culture.

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BIANCA BALDI  
*Parable of a Sunfish*

My PhD research project (2020–2024) at Sint Lucas Antwerp, *Play White: Racial Passing And Embodied Images*, revolves around the figure of the common cuttlefish, *Sepia officinalis*. This cephalopod uses rapid adaptive camouflage through the specialised cells — chromatophores — in its skin. In my research, I adopt this as an allegory for what decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo calls ‘epistemological disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2011). The cuttlefish is the most mutable cephalopod, its chromatophores enabling it to change the appearance of its body to fit the environment. This adaptability — or *versipellis* as Hyde (1998) calls it, drawing on the Latin for ‘turn’ and ‘skin’ — enables it to present ‘pluriversal’ images, creating a destabilising effect. This condition guides both the material experiments in my studio practice and my research reflection.

My research departed from the concept of racial passing, with a focus on post-apartheid South Africa and the broader implications of shapeshifting, code-switching and fluid identity categories. This research is both autobiographical and theoretical, looking at racial passing to engage with mutable identity through lived experience and history. At the same time, my broader research investigates the production of formal knowledge, particularly in the natural sciences, and how systems of classification, often linked to colonialism and scientific racism, persist today. This dual focus and critique on ‘passing’ and ‘classification’ draws from decolonial theory, where I examine speciesism and its intersections with race.

**The starting point of this research project was a video filmed at the MIO (Mediterranean Institute of Oceanography) in Marseille, another knowledge centre. The subsequent work comprises elements including textiles, glass pieces, photographs and ink drawings.**



In the centre of the image, a leopard is lying down on the white studio backdrop. In front of the leopard, there is a camera mounted on a tripod. The edges of the backdrop are clearly visible, showing the rolled and crumpled paper. On the floor, in the foreground, is a pair of black sneakers.

The photograph, *Zero Latitude (Panthère naturalisée)*, was taken at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, and depicts a taxidermied leopard hunted by the French colonial explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, after whom the city of Brazzaville is named. This image frequently recurs in my reflections on the politics of viewing. As a photographer whose medium is fundamentally based on the lens, it prompts considerations of perspective, the dynamics of observation and the staging of scenes — whether in museum displays or in the images we create. Photography is central to my practice and training, serving as the catalyst for my research. My artistic endeavours invariably commence with photography, which then extends into various media, following the inherent logic of the photographic process.

The following speculative vignettes were first developed as a lecture accompanying my solo exhibition entitled ‘Patina’ at the Photoforum Pasquart Biel, Switzerland in 2022, and later as part of the conference ‘Naming Natures’ at the Natural History Museum of Neuchâtel in 2023. I chose to deploy this style to explore moments or snapshots of experience, knowledge production and the consequences of scientific classification, allowing for more speculative and imaginative thinking. Each vignette is a microcosm of the larger critique in my PhD’s reflective text, examine more deeply the implications of observation, classification and resistance. By blending storytelling with theoretical critique, I aim for the reader to engage with these issues through multiple lenses: emotional, intellectual and historical.

### *The Parable*

In a quiet room filled with specimens and jars, a young student stood before Louis Agassiz, the esteemed naturalist. Agassiz, with his sharp eyes and greying hair, held out a sunfish, glistening and lifeless. Abruptly he handed it to the student, instructing him to observe.

Hours passed, the student’s frustration growing as the silence deepened. What more was there to see? Scales, fins, the curve of its body — everything had been noted. But Agassiz remained unmoved by the student’s reports, insisting he look again. Agassiz believed that a ‘physical fact is as sacred as a moral principle’ (Seiburth, 2007) and demanded nothing less than reverence for the smallest detail.

The lesson was simple yet profound. The sunfish, ordinary in every way, became a gateway to understanding. Each line, each shadow on its body held truths that only patience could reveal. In this parable, recounted by Ezra Pound in his *ABC of Reading* (Pound, 2010), the student learned that the essence of study lay not in hasty conclusions but in the deep, unyielding gaze that sees the world in full. Through the silent exchange between teacher and student, the sacredness of observation was made clear, and the sunfish became more than a specimen — it became a testament to the discipline of seeing.

After looking and looking at the fish, it finally decomposed. The student ‘looked the fish to death’. Unlike other animals, it is difficult to stop time with a fish or sea-invertebrate using taxidermy. Pigmentation and colour are quickly lost and there is shrinking in the bodies of certain gelatinous animals like squid, octopus and jellyfish (Baldi & Louw, 2024). A solution to this dilemma was proposed by the Blaschka’s, a family of Czech-German artisans, who created intricate glass models of the natural world. These models, which can now be found in natural history collections such as those of the museums in London and Vienna, were meticulously designed to mimic the natural colours and textures, bringing life to the creatures after their death. When first displayed in natural history museums, these models were often displayed beside real specimens, thus acting as stand-ins for the creatures whose bodies could not withstand the effects of decomposition (Baldi & Louw, 2024).

Agassiz insisted on observational science. In his early work, he used the medium of drawing to document all the species of freshwater fish he could find at Lake Neuchâtel. Later, he used another contemporary technology, the daguerreotype, to demonstrate his observations. Agassiz’s science was a science that examined, looked at and measured his subjects to their proverbial death. Ezra Pound praised Agassiz for his precision in this parable, going so far as to say that this method — ‘careful first-hand examination of the matter and constant comparison of one slide or specimen with another’ — should be applied to the study of literature.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of application of the scientific method was behind the racialisation of bodies. A science that used categorisation — Linnaean binomial naming — to order and structure the very organic world in which we live. This was not confined to fauna and flora. Rather, this speciesism, whereby everything is broken down into categories, would be applied to unfounded theories of scientific racism, such as Agassiz’s theory of polygenism (Rogers, 2020). Polygenism is a theory that posits the idea that different races or human groups have different origins. It gained prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during a period of increased exploration, colonisation and scientific inquiry into human diversity. Modern science, particularly genetics and evolutionary biology, has since thoroughly debunked polygenism. While polygenism has been scientifically discredited,

1 Pound admired Agassiz’s precision, but this method, when applied to racialized bodies, extended scientific categorisation to the extreme, contributing to harmful ideologies like anti-Semitism and scientific racism. Ezra Pound’s anti-Semitism is

well-documented through his writings, broadcasts and personal correspondence, and we reckon with Pound’s literary work through the lens of his outspoken anti-Semitism. See *Ezra Pound Speaking: Radio Speeches of World War II, 1941–1945* (1978).

its influence persisted throughout the twentieth century, fueling racist ideologies and pseudoscience that underpinned discriminatory systems. During World War II, it shaped Nazi racial policies, providing a pseudoscientific basis for eugenics and genocide. Similarly, in apartheid-era South Africa, polygenist notions reinforced the implementation of racial classifications used to justify segregation, systemic oppression and the denial of basic rights to non-white populations.

Katherine McKittrick, a contemporary scholar of Black studies, responds to this long scientific tradition in her epistolary essay entitled 'Dear Science' (McKittrick, 2021).

*January 2019*

*Dear Science,*

*When I last wrote, I told you about how I am trying to work out — without descriptively writing out — the intellectual-physiological effort that emerges alongside black rebellion. You didn't write back. Alone, without your response, I had to confront something I keep grasping for but cannot seem to explicate well: black rebellion, the work of liberation, regardless of scale, is livingness; black livingness is unmeasurable; our despair and heartbreak and friendships and ways of loving and moving, are tethered to a dehumanizing system of knowledge, a monumental story, that is measured (unflinching) and precise (quantifiable).*

She expresses how emotions, the relational, and abject bodies do not fit into this tethered precise system of monumental knowledge; this observational science ignores the living and breathing.



## *The Monument*

In the photograph from 1906, the word *Zoology* stands proudly across the façade of a building at Stanford University, a symbol of knowledge and progress. Yet, in the foreground, another image disrupts this calm: a statue of Louis Agassiz, toppled and broken, its face buried in the earth. The mighty figure, once upright, now lies humbled by an unseen hand.

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, a force of nature both sudden and unforgiving, had ripped the statue from its pedestal, hurling it to the ground. ‘An act of God,’ they called it — a term meant to absolve, to speak of power beyond human control. But here, in the stark contrast between the solid architecture and the fallen monument, the phrase takes on new meaning. The earth itself seemed to have cast its judgment, shaking loose the image of a man whose beliefs once divided humanity.

His likeness lay prone, while the word *Zoology* remained untouched, a silent witness to the event, a testament to the unpredictable balance between human ambition and the greater forces at play.

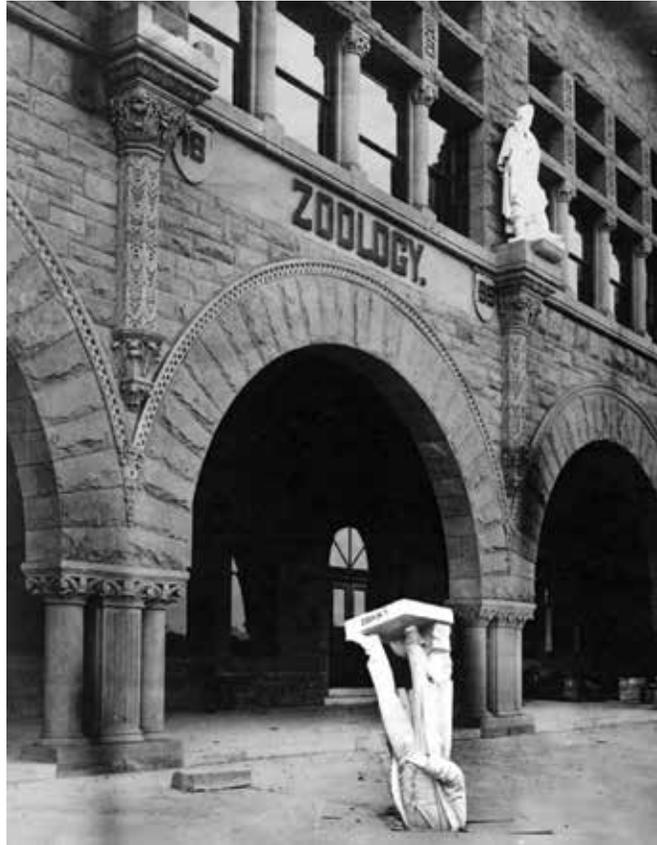
Looking at this image today, however, evokes contemporary images in the media of monuments of colonial actors being torn down during decolonial movements around the world. In the South African context at the University of Cape Town, an image of the seated Cecil John Rhodes<sup>2</sup> being taken down in 2015 became emblematic of the *Rhodes Must Fall* student movement to decolonise education.

The decolonial movement has contributed to the removal of many statues of colonisers, and, as Robert Bevan outlines in his book *Monumental Lies* (2022), monuments, architecture and cities are physical evidence of past events, previous ways of thinking and of politics, economics and values that percolate through to today. Even though there has been more consciousness of how historical monuments permeate, other monuments still stand in the form of names of the natural world: many explorers or scientists gave their names to different species and taxa, and these scientific figures have not been dealt the same level of scrutiny.

As part of my research for an artwork called *Zero Latitude* (2014), I photographed the *Cercopithecus neglectus* — aka De Brazza’s monkey, named after the French colonial explorer — at Duisburg Zoo. Many explorers and scientists like De Brazza named species after themselves. Louis Agassiz also had many taxa named after him, especially fish, his speciality, but also beetles and other animals in a long list of scientific names. His naming was not limited to fauna: there is the Agassiz Horn, a mountain range in Switzerland, and a crater on Mars named Louis Agassiz.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil John Rhodes was a British Imperial and founder of De Beers Diamonds. The falling of his bronze statue in this movement symbolised the fall of white supremacy.

Toppled statue of Louis Agassiz, 1906.



In recent times we have seen physical monuments to scientists and explorers with racist ideals fall, but in the system of knowledge these monuments still stand. Burchell's coucal, De Brazza's Monkey, *Gopherus agassizii* (desert tortoise), *Forbesichthys agassizii* (spring cavefish), *Isocapnia agassizii* (stonefly), and the list goes on ...

### *The Image*

The year was 1850. In a small, darkened studio in South Carolina, Joseph T. Zealy prepared his camera, the newest marvel of the age, for a task that would etch faces into a silver-plated surface. Louis Agassiz, a man driven by his belief in polygenism, stood by, his gaze fixed on the subjects before him.

Seven pairs of eyes met the lens, each subject bound in an iron brace (Sehgal, 2020). Renty, with his weathered face, became the most recognised, but beside him stood his daughter Delia, as well as Drana, Alfred, Fassena, Jack, and Jem — each name whispered in the silence of the room, each body scrutinised as though it were a specimen. These bodies treated with the same methodology as his study of fish in *Histoire naturelle des poissons d'eau douce de l'Europe centrale* in 1839.

Agassiz sought to capture what he believed were the 'pure' features of Africans, to compare them to European bodies, to justify a cruel theory with cold technology. The daguerreotypes, fifteen in all, would hold their faces still, but behind each image lay stories untold, lives un-lived in the full light of freedom.

Photography, as a medium of representation, occupies a dual role as a vehicle for both truth and artifice. It claims the authority of documentary by serving as a tool for legitimisation. Often called a 'faithful medium', it uniquely captures and mirrors reality with remarkable accuracy and detail, emphasising photography's role as an archival tool.

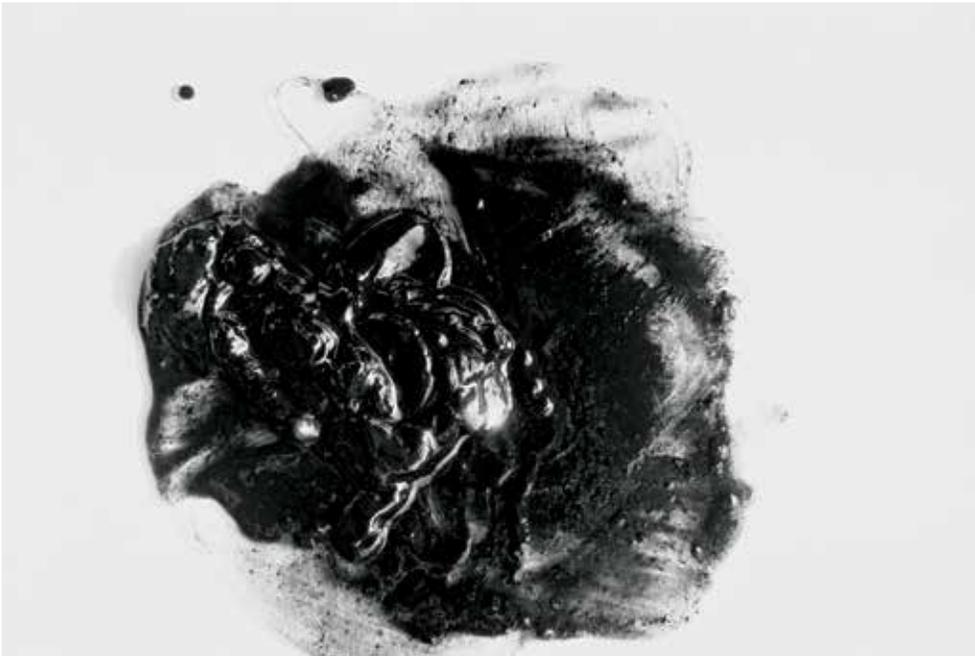
In the nineteenth century, silver-based photographic prints were treated with sepia toning to enhance their longevity, making them more resistant to fading and deterioration over time. It also imbued the prints with the visual warmth which is widely associated with early photography. This was achieved through a chemical process where the silver particles in the photograph were bleached out and chemically replaced with silver sulphide, resulting in the characteristic reddish-brown hue. This technique derives its name from the aquatic species *Sepia officinalis* (the common cuttlefish), whose reddish-brown ink was originally used as a pigment.

Cuttlefish are masters of biomimicry, who use their ink and their ability to change colour, texture and pattern to blend into their surroundings. This helps them avoid predators, hunt for prey and communicate with other cuttlefish. Their ability to mimic their environment is a survival mechanism, a way to represent their environment through their bodies. Both photography and the cuttlefish have an intricate relationship with light and their environment, embodying the ability to deceive, reveal and represent with precision.

The cuttlefish, however, occupies an ambiguous space. Neither fixed nor easily defined, it embraces this fluidity, which contrasts with science's tendency to classify and measure with precision. This scientific approach stems from the Enlightenment's quest for knowledge, which symbolised the emergence of 'light' — clarity and understanding — from the 'darkness' of ignorance.

This drive for clarity, however, conflicts with the poetics of opacity. The poetics of opacity challenges the dominance of transparency and clarity as ultimate goals, suggesting that obscurity can foster deeper engagement and richer interpretations. Philosopher Édouard Glissant (1990) used 'opacity' as a metaphor for the right of individuals and cultures, particularly those marginalised by colonialism, to remain complex, unknowable and resistant to simplification or stereotyping. This concept advocates for a world where diversity and difference are valued without the need for full comprehension or 'knowing'.

The cuttlefish also uses its ink as a defence mechanism to evade predators. It releases a cloud of dark ink from its ink sac, a smokescreen which can confuse or distract a predator, giving the cuttlefish time to escape.



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