Contemporary Black Choreo-Performers: Intersecting Bodies, Dis/Placement, Race

by

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Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art Histories

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2022

Abstract

This major research paper investigates “dis/placement” as an aesthetic strategy and probes into how it intersects with race, memory, and trauma. The text problematizes the position of racialized, displaced subjects through the perspective of those who deal with this experience continuously – including myself. The case-studies, Okwui Okpokwasili and Kettly Noël, use a variety of methods to reflect their experience of displacement: from autobiography, narrative, and memoir to utilizing their body and identity in explicit ways. They benefit from an emerging artistic genre that I call “choreo-performance”; a kinetic medium that combines choreography and performance to engage audiences affectively and empathetically.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to my primary advisor, Dr. Jim Drobnick and my secondary advisor, Dr. Camille Isaacs for their thorough feedback and continued guidance throughout this MRP. I am very appreciative of Dr. Keith Bresnahan for his help and support during my time at OCAD. Thank you to OCAD University for funding my studies through the President's Scholarship.

I am also deeply indebted to my family, who has always believed in me.

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Introduction

My experience of displacement started years before immigration. One by one, my friends bought a one-way ticket to fly to other countries to seek a *better* life. Detachment from my homeland happened gradually, and it was clear that sooner or later, I, too, would have to fly. Of course, my friends and I promised to keep in touch and remain close despite the distance. Honestly, we have tried our best. But displacement creates rupture and fragmented identities. I am not sure if the truism – that wherever I go I still have many friends – is negative or counterproductive, but I am certain about the bitterness and the traumatic weight of the experience.

After years of planning, I finally landed in Canada on February 21, 2021; it was the time that Covid-19 hit the world most virulently, and everyone spent a lot of time in quarantine. The silence of those days is not describable as I was living almost alone in a small city in Quebec (Shawinigan). Moving to a new place should have been an adventurous experience, but isolation made me numb and disoriented. I could not feel "happy" in either my previous or current home. Immigration was *my* decision; therefore, I could not be entitled to be sad. I was – and still am – missing a land that I loved but was not able to digest its crisis anymore. I came to Canada to improve my life; however, the dominant feeling of those days was the insecurity about my decision. Is my life really getting better? Did I make the right decision? Was it worth this amount of loneliness and distance from my family and loved ones? Should I not have been more responsible about my homeland in this strange time? But this was not the end of the story.

My mental state got exacerbated when vaccination started in Canada. People shared photos of their moments of vaccination on social media and, naturally, I should have been happy like other people in the city, country, or even the world. But how could I be happy when Iran, my homeland, was situated among the hot spots of Covid-19? The cases there were increasing every

day and people would die in great numbers. Every phone call from Iran could cause distress, continuously reminding me about how about my sister, parents, relatives, friends were at risk. Why did Canadians receive vaccinations first? I got an initial dose with a deep feeling of guilt, reluctance, and rage.

As a displaced subject, I have experienced moments of implosion that are not tellable, or they seem trivial, or even too specific for people in the new place in which I have decided to live. People talking about the cultural, political, or sociological context of Iran usually have a touristic or exotic view towards the complicated situation of my country in the world. To understand the location of my culture, people need a deeper context, and they, honestly, often do not want to know, or do not *need* to know. When empathy is underestimated, the absence of closeness appears, and the displaced subject starts to live a parallel life in which they feel alienated.

To have a better life, I needed to master a new language, mindset, and culture (which, again, I do not consider essentially negative), but this was not a *necessity* for a Canadian to educate themselves about my background; it means a long history is overlooked. Utter loneliness was the first blatant expression of displacement and was enough for me to understand how far I am from my classmates and how impossible it is to feel intimate. The constant vulnerability that I feel as a displaced subject is not just the result of visible violence against displaced or racialized subjects, but also is the ambiguity that displacement itself creates, and the society aggravates. For people in the host land (the new place that the displaced subject chooses to settle in), the story of an immigrant is always indefinite and abstract. Therefore, displacement makes traumas, minorities, and ghettos. An immigrant needs a community with shared experience, that can sympathize. I have experienced a sense of unevenness that affected me but was out of my

control; and the only group of people that could understand the roughness of those days was other immigrants.

I include the subjective introduction here since I believe in the power of the "personal." The reflection of one's experience can provide an exceptional opportunity for the reader or the audience to *listen*. Therefore, this text does not adhere to the orthodox structure of an MRP. The personal *entrée* is followed by an *adagio* in which I try to elaborate on the formal and theoretical framework of my ideas. Thereafter, I analyze two *variations* (Okwui Okpokwasili and Kettly Noël) and try to demonstrate how each case study fits the context. I finish my text with a short segment as a *coda* to wrap up my thoughts.

This MRP asks three main questions. The first question involves the role of choreo-performance in the current art scene. What advantages does this hybrid medium offer artists? The question seeks the potentials of choreo-performance for contemporary artists that cannot be offered by other media. While other media has demonstrated strong potential to cover the discourse of race and concepts revolving around it, choreo-performance has many additional advantages that have been explored in this text.

The second question my research address concerns the points of intersection between bodies, migration, and space. This aspect sets up a framework to theorize the raw visual materials and artistic practices into a cogent narrative. To provide an answer, I will probe into different resources and articulate a general understanding of migration and performance. This issue is most engaged with theoretical aspects rather than visual features.

The last question is more concerned with art: Given the mobility of contemporary Black artists, how is the experience of displacement manifested and what are the implications? To align the theoretical framework with the artistic expression, analyzing the examples seems

significant. Human experiences are closely tied to affect, and these can be reflected in various forms of expression. The dioramic aspect of choreo-performance in relation to space and body enables artists of color to translate their experiences to movements and thus provide the viewers with a grounded understanding of displacement in contemporary culture.

Dis/placement as a core idea of this MRP is dissected from various directions. The place that one occupies and resides in as one's homeland becomes a part of the subject's identity and provides them with a sense of fixity. Displacement bulldozes this desirable fantasy of plateau; in a new place there may be many macro- and micro-occurrences that create an unreliable peace. Through the process of displacement, the body and, consequently, identity encounter unpredictable experiences that challenge the cogency of the "self." Sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall believed that "identity is not a matter of essence but of positioning, and hence there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position and positionality."[1] The placement of the body, its location in society, and the concerns revolving around it, such as race and gender, has challenged the politics of identity and influenced the contemporary visual culture accordingly.

Displacement, in this context, bears both physical and emotional effects and the consequent estrangement is the meaningful material for a displaced subject to activate latent creativity that they have been deprived to express. I consider emotion as one of the principal substances of creativity. In the process of finding and defining themselves in a privileged society, a displaced body encounters visible and invisible traumas that may hurt their peace but prepare them to act fearlessly, express their identity in an explicit way, and therefore, re-construct the today's color-conscious society. Therefore, the discourse of displacement in this text involves three main aspects: race, memory, and trauma.

The memories associated with a land constitute a massive part of an immigrant's lived experience and fertile materials for the artistic practice, since emotion and expression link to each other with memories. In order for these memories to be perceptible and documented, they need a mediator between them and the outside world. While media such as sculpture, installation, and photography apply objects and images as metaphors of memories, choreo-performance (a medium that is at the same time neither and both choreography and performance) benefits from a more tangible material: the body with the layers of sediment of one's lived experience.

In the context of this MRP, what differentiates choreo-performance from other media is its credibility as a corporeal and rich discipline to provide bodies of color with rooms to represent the experience of displacement in the form of movements. The image of a racialized and displaced body and the concerns surrounding it has been a recurring concept in contemporary art, since bodies are not forgetful; they are databases of memories, traumas, and stigmas. Megan Nicely, dance artist/scholar, by referring to choreographer Susan Rethorst, considers a "somatic intelligence" for the body that can analyze affection in advance of mind: "bodies understand direct, efficient connections that do not require preparation or linguistic translation."[2] Displaced bodies in choreo-performance are conditioned to exhibit acts, and trained by traumas to respond based on memories. In other words, if objects are the main refuge for memories in other media, bodies are the container of the first-hand historical knowledge of a community in choreo-performance.

A displaced body has a bold affiliation with images that are exotic and thus capable of making individuals vulnerable in the host land. Exoticism mostly functions as an element to attract the gaze of the dominant power. Art historian Amelia Jones, by quoting writer and poet

Malek Alloula, believes that "exoticism is always established by the gaze of the other."[3] Thus, utilizing racialized bodies as the holders of memories is not necessarily always successful. Black female corporeality has been comprehended as a passive presence that gives the viewer the full credit for appropriating it. Daphne Brooks, race and gender scholar, states that "black women's bodies continue to bear the gross insult and burden of spectacular (representational) exploitation in transatlantic culture."[4] However, the surprising approach is that, sometimes, Black female subjects mean to use the very potentials of their bodies as a performative strategy. Nicole R. Fleetwood, art historian and curator, uses the term "excess flesh" to investigate the location of the Black female body in visual culture and to define a framework to accentuate the subjectivity of women of color. By using the term, Fleetwood studies the codes of hypervisibility and states that excess flesh can "refracts the gaze back upon itself."[5] The hypervisibility of the Black female body in the contemporary art scene has regulated Black female bodies as "still" objects to be gazed at. By studying this potential through the lens of Black choreo-performers whose main material is their excessive presence in visual culture, I try to challenge this passive habit and the essential stereotype.

To counter the cliched image of a displaced and racialized subject, there needs to be a new confrontational method that supports the subjectivity of the body in a new place. For me, taking a linear or essentialist approach towards the concept of race seems impossible, since essentialism, can function as self-exoticization and leads to self-exclusion. "Violence" is a universal concept. We are living in a system of "beings"; one cannot map a cogent perception of "self" individually, and various forms of being are comprehended in an interrelated model. Ethnic and racial studies, feminist and gender studies, diaspora studies, and any type of civil rights movement are more statements on human rights, rather than just dealing with a specific

community. Black visual culture is related to me (as an Iranian woman). Any slight shift in the lives of the Black women is influential in and can alter the lives of all minority groups. I cannot help but notice a resemblance between the hatred that exerts violence upon Black people in the diaspora, and the chain of crimes victimizing Iranians, specifically women. Exclusion is the kernel of terror, and discrimination has similar mechanisms whether it is against women, gender-diverse people, a specific ethnicity, or any other minority group.

Choreo-Performance: A Protean Medium

I attempt to define a language to provide the reader with enough specificity to engage with the hardship that displaced subjects deal with in the host land; it is a terminology that can accurately articulate what the subject and the medium are and what the case-studies aim to manifest through their practice. “Choreo-performance” and “Dis/placement” are two words that are frequently used in this text and require more explanation.

Something falters when I describe my case studies’ practice. Given that their genre of work is fluid in dance plus performance, I feel the need to address their practice with a more specific definition that can cover both disciplines; “choreo-performance” can provide this particularity. The word “choreography,” meaning to design a sequence of movements in dance, is derived from the Latin word *choros* (dance and movement); I describe the medium as a kind of performance that benefits from the expressionist qualities of dance. Merce Cunningham with his “dance-videos” pioneered the use of technology, video, music, design, and visual arts in relation to dance. During his professional career, he collaborated with prominent figures from various disciplines and believed that "the dancers’ movements would no longer be tied to the rhythms, mood, and structure of music. Instead, all forms of art could stand alone, simply sharing a

common space and time."[6] Choreo-performance, correspondingly, is rooted in dance but welcomes the improvisation and actionist sides of performance art.

From another point of view, critic and art historian Claire Bishop defines a boundary between *performing arts* and *visual art performance* and believes that performing arts are traditionally presented by professional dancers and performers in theatre and concert halls, and visual art performances that are considered consciously deskilled, precisely under-rehearsed and unpredictable, are enacted in lofts and alternative spaces, or on the street.[7] Choreo-performance is located somewhere in-between these two disciplines, which can be staged anywhere by anyone. While "contingencies of location and audience" and "singularity of the event"[8] are still the remarkable features of choreo-performance, it oscillates between theatre, performance, and visual arts as separate but reciprocal disciplines.

Based on the mentioned definitions, I can define choreo-performance as a non-identical twin of performance. It is a kinetic medium that presents volatile moments that endure a split-second and are not as stable as moments in performance. Thus, moments in choreo-performance should be *experienced* rather than just *seen*. To make my intention tangible: if one considers a performance piece equal to the *Standing Wave* (1919-20) sculpture by Naum Gabo, choreo-performance would be similar to *Red Lily Pads* (1956) by Alexander Calder. Both pieces classified under the category of kinetic art, but the movements in Gabo's sculpture are systematic, predictable, and easily documented; however, Calder's piece escapes from its structure and embraces emotion, randomness, and chaos – due to its sensibility to the surrounding, it cannot repeat the same movements twice.

Moreover, as previously experienced in contemporary art scene – in Marina Abramović's retrospective *The Artist Is Present* (2010), or that of Yoko Ono's *One Woman Show, 1960–1971*

(2015) – documenting performances, and presenting the archive as an independent exhibition are not guaranteed to be successful, but, at least, it is *possible* for the medium of performance to be documented. Due to its complex ligature to narrative and its dependence on accident, choreo-performance refuses to be documented. Furthermore, the narrative and the movements in choreo-performance are not as rehearsed as in theatre and dance; it still embraces improvisation and coincidence and exists in a hybrid territory between different disciplines.

Dis/Placement and Neither/Norhood

Dis/placement is the second word that I repeatedly use in this text. It signifies the placement of a subject in the process of immigration. Khachig Tölölyan, scholar of diaspora studies, frames the fluidity of the term "diaspora," and believes that this term has been extensively utilized to encompass a variety of concepts such as dispersion, transnationalism, globalism, mobility, in addition to being used in disciplines dealing with nationalism, ethnicity, migration, and postcolonialism. He argues that diaspora is a subset for dispersion, and it has been used broadly for different kinds of mobility and migration.[9] Therefore, based on the context of this MRP and its affiliation with space and place, I decided not to use "diaspora" when talking about the instability of the location of an immigrant, but rather, alternatively, to try to apply a more specific word like "dis/placement," which embraces the visual and imaginative aspects of place and space.

Displaced subjects experience some mental crisis that impose a neither/nor situation upon their identity. The most innocent hope for a displaced subject is to imagine that they can escape from the fate of their homeland by immigration.[10] Land is jealous; it captivates memories to force the bodies to stay.[11] Displaced subjects – who struggle with the melancholy of

displacement – as postcolonial theorist Edward Said (referring to epics) described, "construct a new world that somewhat resembles an old one left behind forever. […] Odysseus returns to Ithaca after years of wandering; Achilles will die because he cannot escape his fate."[12] Land is the very ground upon which racism is grown and nourished by discrimination. A displaced subject is neither an outsider, since they still have their roots in their homeland, nor an insider, since their interaction with their land(s) – both home and host land – is distanced and second-hand.

The displaced body always looks back because memories and bodies are merged; however, this is not the whole story. Alex Weingrod and André Levy study the binary of homeland/diaspora as a flat and simplistic idea. By probing into some case-studies (Ethiopian, Moroccan, and Russian diasporas) they explain the complexity and fluidity of the concepts of homeland and diaspora and investigate the paradoxical feelings that immigrants experience in a new place. Weingrod and Levy believe that a homeland is always a nostalgic place that immigrants desire (in some cases morally) to return to; however, returning home does not solve the mystery. To locate themselves in their homeland, immigrants experience another kind of diaspora. Homeland is not essentially synonymous with center; a place can be, paradoxically, the homeland and, simultaneously, the diaspora. One can still be marginalized in one's homeland and maintain links with the second place one has lived in.[13]

Thus, the displaced body is stuck in a situation that guarantees insecurity. As Tölölyan states: "The diasporic community sees itself as linked to but different from those among whom it has settled; eventually, it also comes to see itself as powerfully linked to, but in some ways different from, the people in the homeland as well."[14] Being in limbo is an interminable process, and an immigrant finds/loses their attachment to both spaces every day. The experience of

displacement is accompanied by a sense of ambivalence and bewilderment as Homi Bhabha believes, a colonized subject is “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”[15] The moment that the subject realizes about this “not-quiteness” is when the trauma of racism and discrimination happens.

However, loss and trauma can construct a meaningful identity. Migration, for Ahmed, means "to lose something can also mean to gain a potential to find something, [...] even if what you find will not be the same things that have been lost."[16] The neither/nor position of an immigrant and the confusion that it causes is the main material for one of my case-studies, as Okwui Okpokwasili explains:

> I claim an Igbo identity in Nigeria. Yet, when I am there, I am clearly a very distant relation, if not a tourist. My family is Igbo; they came to the US and stayed because the Biafran War devastated their homeland. So, my being raised in the United States is directly tied to the legacy of the Igbo people. But I didn't grow up there. I don't live in Nigeria. I don't even speak Igbo. […] I feel like I'm looking at so much from the outside, yet it's also inside me. I'm wrestling with that. That's why I had to create a fiction.[17]

Therefore, the displaced subject has left their sanctuary – that had been synonymous with subjectivity – to seek a better life but finds themselves maladjusted to a different context. And the hide-and-seek game between a displaced subject and their land(s) lasts forever.

Embracing a twofold identity can be productive when it comes to action. Stuart Hall, referring to the novelist Salman Rushdie, described the situation of “diasporic subjects” as “translated” subjects and manifested that “such subjects must learn to inhabit more than one

identity, dwell in more than one culture, and speak more than one language."[18] Choreo-performance functions as a language in which the experience of displacement is translated into movements. The fluidity that the case-studies in this MRP are dealing with can be dissolved and reflected in bodies, and choreo-performance with its bodily quality can be the best candidate to represent this experience. The dancing body experiences constant movement from place to place and displacement is the inherent feature of dance as a medium. This metaphorically points to the displaced body that wanders from land to land and carries their home on their shoulders wherever they go.

This MRP looks to the moments that a Black subject experiences trauma in society and tries to observe and analyze how these are manifested in choreo-performances. Attaining a sound grasp of the location of the Black body in space/society is not possible unless by reviewing the memoirs of racialized subjects. Reading personal experiences can make one aware of the history that has deep impact on the present. Because as Christina Sharpe, Black Studies scholar, states "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[19] It is with reading the personal moments that one can be able to identify. The act of identification softens the sharp and disturbing edges of racism and can be a certain remedy. The statement that *I can identify with your situation* is not trivial and can pave the path for overcoming racism.

I am strongly for the idea that dis/placement and its link to body cannot be considered just a nomadic lifestyle, but also it is a productive context and material for a meaningful artistic practice. Race and gender scholar Samantha Pinto uses a similar approach in finding connections between Black woman writers' work. She believes that "diaspora becomes not only a set of physical movements, then, but also a set of aesthetic and interpretive strategies."[20] Agreeing with her, and analyzing Black females' choreo-performances, I intend to map correspondences

between displacement (as a representative strategy), racialized bodies, and performance. The reasons for choosing the medium of choreo-performance are many, but its similarity to real life makes it easier for the viewer to identify. “But she walks as though she’s in the street” – Yvonne Rainer once heard this comment about one of her performances.[21] Rainer was one of the pioneers who blurred the boundaries between dance and everyday life, unapologetically. After her, dance became a medium with new potentials that influenced both performance and art. Performance has served as the closest form of expression to daily life: its close relation to the body, its similarities to daily movements, the space it occupies, and its potential for social activism. Defining a boundary between the arts in the contemporary era is nearly impossible, and performance more than any other media can reinforce this buoyant quality. It stretches its arms to embrace any signs of “being.” My two case studies, Okwui Okpokwasili and Kettly Noël, suggest two different kinds of being inspired by their own identities and bodies. The experience of dis/placement will be explored in two of their choreo-performances that are most associated with the image of the displaced subject, traumas of racism, and the discrimination against racialized bodies.

Okwui Okpokwasili: The Blast of a Postponed Rage

The collective acts of Black women, stereotypes of Blackness, and the violence against their bodies are specific subjects that form the core idea of the artistic practice of Nigerian-born American artist, Okwui Okpokwasili. Displacement has imposed traumas and limitations on her identity. Furthermore, the sorrow caused by some events like the Nigerian women’s protest during the Women's War in the 1920s, the schoolgirl kidnappings by Boko Haram in 2014, and the experience of Otherness, have been recurring topics in her multidisciplinary practice.

Choreo-performances, including Bessie Award winning *Pent-Up: A Revenge Dance* (2008), *Poor People's TV Room* (2018), and *When I Return Who Will Receive Me* (2016), have been staged by the artist in different venues. For instance, "Sitting on a Man," which is a kind of collective protest by Igbo women in order to criticize colonial officials to address the economic and social concerns, was the source of inspiration for a work called *Sitting on a Man's Head* (2020). The Igbo women sing, dance, insult, and expose their naked bodies to express their needs and do not leave unless the officials meet their expectations. Okpokwasili sees an indirect link between dance, performance, and protest; in an interview with curator Massimiliano Gioni, she explains that protest is a performative act and states: "What is powerful about performance to me is the ability to sort of impact the bodies of those around you. […] That's performance, that's what happens in protest. [...] To do this durational bodily collision."[22] The encounter and exchange in performance and performativity are the common grounds of dance and performance that interests this choreo-performer. Okpokwasili has collaborated as a performer with many dancers and choreographers such as Ralph Lemon, Nora Chipaumire, and others. The artist recently had a version of *Poor People's TV Room* installed as part of the exhibition *Grief and Grievance, Art and Mourning in America* (2021) at the New Museum, an exhibition that was originally conceived by the late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor.

On the premise of her personal experience as someone who was displaced from her own land (Nigeria) and settled in the Bronx (US), Okpokwasili staged a performance named *Bronx Gothic* (2014). This piece was a 1.5 hour, one-woman show performed by the artist in New York. The choreo-performer resides in the corner of a room and shakes when the audience enters; the room is a semi-dark mise-en-scène, softened by the dim light in contrast with the big shadows, enclosed by long white curtains, and decorated by plant pots and abat-jours. The artist

describes her feeling to the space: “I think of it as a bedroom, a secret chamber the audience enters. The sheets are marked with all our effluvia and secrets are told. It's a zone where strange things happen, the zone right before dreaming.”[23] The piece is a choreo-performance, but the gloomy site and the installation add a theatrical layer to the work that is a remarkable feature of Okpokwasili’s body of work.

The artist presents a narrative that has been marginalized for years: the story of the Black girl in a new land. Okpokwasili’s version of the story was based on her personal childhood experiences as a Black girl and the racism she faced because of her body and gender. The artist tells a semi-autobiographical story that includes a subjective (read traumatic) experience from her adolescence and her first encounter with sexual pleasure. During the performance, the audience witnesses intense physical movements, convulsions, shaking and vibrating of a Black female body. After a while, the performer, unarmed and defenseless with an overwhelmed face and a sweaty body, takes the microphone to read a story about two girls (apparently one white and one Black) sharing their secrets about sex and orgasms. One of them is more experienced, and approaches the topic confidently. The other one is less skilled and struggles with an undesired innocence imposed upon her by mainstream society. She asks basic questions about intercourse and the way a body responds to sexual desires: “What is an orgasm?”

The turning point of the story is when the Black girl experiences an abject moment of Blackness – the moment she finds out she is framed as “ugly.”[24] This is when the trauma and its dire consequences happen, the moment of conflict caused by arbitrary judgments. The traumatic aspect of racism involves more than just the visible violence against the racialized body, as Sharpe explains “it is gratuitous violence that occurs at the level of a structure that constitutes a Black as the constitutive outside.”[25] There is an invisible tinge of superiority adorned with levity

and sympathy when the white girl intones to the Black girl: “I'm sorry, but you ugly. I mean you know you ugly. You can't let that make you sad.” The Black girl is “positioned” in a racist framework as someone unlovable, who has no choice but accepting her forced ugliness. In other words, the racialized subject seeks respect but lacks white standards. She, accordingly, initiates hysteric reactions to the unfair judgment that had been projected upon her. This is not a simple judgment but an interpretation that rests on racist structures. The source of this anxious “unhappiness,” as Sara Ahmed explains, is that a migrant should overcome a loss that is not inherently a loss, but also, a kind of loss that has been considered obvious in a racialized body by the dominant power. In fact, the displaced body is perceived as incomplete, but does not know exactly what they are lacking and based on what criteria; failure to digest this uncertainty causes a melancholic hole and damage to the subject as well as others.[26] At this point, the audience of *Bronx Gothic* witnessed the moment of rupture and the avalanche of rage attached with a sense of regret:

> You know he thinks you fine. Everybody thinks you fine. I think you fine. And I’m proud cause you my best friend [....] The truth is you so fine and I'm so ugly [….] I know. Get off me. Get off me [….] I wanna slap you. I wanna slap your face. And I know I shouldn't slap nobody. And I shouldn't slap you […] but I do. But I suck slap you. I suck slap you so hard. Cock sucker. Mother fucker ... you feel a dick? […] You feel it? That's my dick. It's been in your face.[27]

The whole piece is about a moment, but the moment happens prior to the incident that causes the displaced (or melancholic) subject to get “psychically stuck.”[28] For a displaced subject

there is a moment that they realize, apparently, there is no escape from their perceived fate. I want to borrow the term "double melancholy" from a memoir by C. E. Gatchalian to describe this experience, that not only does the Black girl experience the trauma of rejection, but she must deal with the melancholy of race and displacement (I can even claim that this experience is "triple melancholy"). Gatchalian explains the experience of a Brown Queer person (in this case Black displaced woman) in white dominant society as a melancholic experience:

> When we spot a handsome Caucasian guy in the club and know that it's quite likely we have no chance whatsoever with him. "I'm not racist," we imagine him saying. "I have lots of non-white friends. But sexually, I'm only into white dudes." Of course, one can argue that the only way to find out for sure is to ask him outright, but the brain doesn't care whether the rejection is imagined or real. Trauma has already occurred; the damage is done.[29]

Bronx Gothic is a purely personal and subjective piece. Re-enacting a traumatic experience can be torturous, but reading the situation of displaced subjects in a fair and uncolored way is not possible, unless with scrutinizing details of their lives. The experience of an immigrant or a racialized subject is always an abstract totality in the host land, and testimonies can present dots for the viewer, listener, or reader to connect, in order to uncover a cogent and palpable narrative; Okpokwasili's piece acts as a countermeasure that challenges the solidity of the history. Sharpe describes history as "dysgraphia" that "turns Black bodies into fungible flesh and deposits them there, betrayed."[30] For a displaced identity, there should be a narrative to be tied to their roots and these personal stories are decisive elements in the history and the identity of a community.

Without a land, leaving is conceivable, but without a tellable narration, a community is exposed to the danger of oblivion, and one can get detached from the real world. Saidiya Hartman, African American cultural historian, on the significance of "personal," manifests that "I wanted to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction."[31] The form of knowledge that autobiography begets is simple but at the same time detailed and vital for the existence of a group. Ahmed, as well, in praise of memoirs, states that "migrant memoirs and fiction give texture and complexity to the migrant experience."[32] Therefore, overlooking the personal can violently distort and decontextualize the history of a community, and this is a reason why re-enacting a moment can be described as necessary.

Presenting a racist scene explicitly without minimizing the details of the narrative is a potential that choreo-performance possesses over other kinds of representational methods and Okpokwasili benefits the most from this capacity. Position and "positionality" lucidly manifests itself in this medium. From a formal perspective, choreo-performance is all about the position of a body in space and how the subject-object relations are defined in a place based on their interaction with each other. I have claimed that contemporary subjects live in an interdependent model and a system of "beings." When Frantz Fanon described the moment of blackness, he, in fact, was talking about the dependence of his perception of "self," which was not based on his essence as a person of color, but on the premise of the position that the society defines for him as the source of danger and anger lacking white conventional features. Okpokwasili translates her memories and traumas into movements in a space that metaphorically reflects the experience of an immigrant.

Circle back to the performance: in the first half of the show, the viewer watched a theatrical scene including some aggressive movements. The performer was shivering with fever

caused by infectious emotions that were swelled under her skin. However, in the second half, in a Brechtian manner, the performer pushes the boundaries of real life and a performative act that is, simultaneously, engaging and intrusive. The audience sits on chairs that are arranged, non-hierarchically, on the same level as the stage. The performer confronts the viewer and has eye contact with them – disturbing! The frottage of performativity with reality pokes the viewer to prevent them from being submerged in theatrical conventions. As long as it is an act, the audience does not feel "endangered" (they laugh at some points), but when the act intersects with reality, they start to hold their breath, since as Butler aptly explains in an article on performativity and its intersection with gender constitution "the act is not contrasted with real, but *constitutes* a reality that is in some sense new" and in this case, the performer's Black body "cannot readily be assimilated into the pre-existing categories."[33]

This performative measure has been previously taken by other Black artists. Adrian Piper, in a series of street performances titled *Catalysis* (1970-73), wore a shirt with the words "wet paint" and tried to ironically challenge the normative understandings of Blackness. The situation of people on the street resembles that of the audience in *Bronx Gothic* as Okpokwasili describes it:

> You don't just get to seat in a protected, elevated space looking down upon me. 'My dick is spitting, at you'. […] I'm also doing it to the people in the audience, I'm so sweaty and sometimes I'm spitting. There is a feeling of like is my blackness getting on you? Am I getting on you? Can you take on not just cool parts of Blackness, but can you take on the pain?[34]

Presenting a concrete scene for the viewer is what the choreo-performance accomplishes, and other media cannot offer: rehearsing the moment that "the virgin sanctity of whiteness will be endangered by that proximity."[35] Getting close to the real world can sharpen the pungent edges of racism and "kills joy."[36] The story is not just an entertaining anecdote for the viewers; the drama can include them as an active participant in this violent act (some of them cry). And this can be compared to the situation that Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Loraine O'Grady's alter-ego) made for their viewer in 1980. She entered an exhibition of "Black Art"– uninvited – and started to repeat "That's enough! No more boot-licking. No more ass-kissing. No more buttering-up. Black art must take more risks!"[37] The artists and scholars that I mentioned all know that this *proximity* – if accepted by the dominant power – is a possible way for the displaced subject to feel at home, to process the trauma of displacement, but they are deprived from it. Moreover, the dominant power knows well that preventing the displaced subject from being fully assimilated into the new context puts obstacles in the path of recovery.

Kettly Noël: The Fractious Face of Joy in Marginalia

The position of the African female body in art and society is the most remarkable idea in Kettly Noël's work. By expressing the invisible and inaudible, the artist tries to challenge the fixed and normative conventions of Blackness. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, she started to dance when she was a teenager in Haitian-American Dance Theatre, and in 1999 founded Donko Seko in Mali, a collective focusing on dance and choreography. The border is a conventional concept for her, and she has performed many choreographic pieces in various parts of the world to establish a new mobility for dancers of color.

Noël utilizes the legacy of African dance and personify it in different ways. *Tichelbé* (2002), *Errance* (2004), *Zombification* (2017) are among her most prominent choreo-performances. She also performed in the role of Zabou in the movie *Timbuktu* (2014). *Errance* was a piece that Noël presented in documenta 14 (2017). In this work, the audience witnesses the struggle of a body that oscillates between visibility and invisibility; she tries to hide in a box in the beginning of a performance. In front of the audiences who surround her, she exhibits her struggle with her body (gendered and racialized) tinged with a sense of shame. She tries to get rid of a red string that limits her movement, swallows her hand, and pulls her hair while wandering the space. Music and narration have a poetic, theatrical, and expressive functions in her works and add deep layers of drama to her choreo-performance pieces.

Je m'appelle Fanta Kaba (2020) is a choreo-performance piece staged in Kunstfest Weimar. The artist stages the piece in different sections and appears in each with different costumes. In the first section, consisting merely a single bed covered by a pink and white floral sheet, a white wooden chair, and the performer's costumes – the theatrical scene represents a dark interior space. However, unlike the minimalistic stage, the performer is dressed extravagantly. In this section of the choreo-performance, Fanta Kaba (the imaginary character who can be Noël's alter-ego) wears a pair of leather knee-high boots, long black stockings, guipure lace and velvet corset top, a fluorescent purple wig, red nail polish, and a black leather mini jupe. Another section of the performance foregrounds more dynamic movements of her body. This part benefits more from the dance as a rhythmic movement to music, rather than utilizing narrative. The red light amplifies the feverish approach of the character. She wears an embellished bra and a leather skirt with a long segment attached to it as a tail – an animalistic element that can turn the performer into an alien and fantastical character.

Fanta Kaba, aesthetically, is a cornucopia of eccentricity, and the artist nourishes the character on vulgarity. All these characteristics – from converting a human into an animal, to lavish attitude, to the duplication of personality – can be considered "campy," since according to Susan Sontag pure camp is a failed seriousness "which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve."[38] Also, the superimposition of Noël's identity with her alter-ego can be investigated as a camp sensibility because as Sontag believes, "when a person or a thing is 'a camp,' a duplicity is involved. Behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing."[39] Thus, I would say the experience of a displaced subject in marginalia can be camp, too, the position of a minority in the society. Sontag in "Notes On 'Camp'," offers a different aesthetic category that can work in parallel with the already existing forms of being. This fits the context of my research in that Black choreo-performers attempt to claim a new mode of empowered manifestation for their invisible and at the same time hyper-visible bodies.

Fanta, in this work, is a prostitute. She narrates her story in first-person and initiates the performance with a monologue. Sitting on the bed and moving seductively, she checks her phone, lists different clients, and provides prices and orders for sex work – "Sucking, licking, €50 [then, she describes the clients' desires and personalities] he likes slaps and being submissive. He pays 200,000 Français EFA, plus a furnished apartment."[40] The artist starts the monologue in a calm and enticing way but ends up shouting and moving aggressively. The massive explosion of wrath, once again, happens when Fanta analyzes her situation: "insulted, spat on, threatened, humiliated."[41] At this point, dance, as an expressive form of representation comes to play. The audience witnesses the instability of the dancer's position and the restless displacement of her body in space. She throws her wig to a corner, takes off her clothes piece by

piece, wanders in the space – stigmatized, clueless, and disoriented. She purges her body of any artificial signs of being a minority and in the end, nothing is there but her fully exposed body in the space that fades in the dark.

The dark scene smoothly leads the viewer to the next section of the piece. Fanta, naked, wearing a pair of transparent high heels and long white tulle veil, appears under the spotlight like a peacock. The viewer hears the stilettos scratching the floor and sees the outline of a silhouetted body that walks cautiously on the stage. The woman covers her body with the veil from time to time. During the choreo-performance, a recorded voice of Fanta starts to narrate a poetic autobiography (in French). The sentences signify a sense of ambiguity in the character:

> I don't know where I'm from. I don't know exactly where I'm going, and I don't know who I am anymore. […] My name is not my real name, same as my date of birth. […] My mother could never tell me who my father really was. […] But I could see in every man a potential father. […] My mother often tells me that I fabricated myself.[42]

Édouard Glissant, writer, poet, and literary critic, suggested a kind of diversity based on which people who are circumscribed as Others have the right to be indefinite. The concept of "opacity" that he offers, challenges the methods that measure the Others based on the ideals of dominant power.[43] Fanta Kaba, with a similar approach, questions a system that posits a minority as a docile subject that owes chastity and clarity to the society. She bravely refuses the desire of the audience to decipher the displaced, racialized, and excluded character and keeps the right for herself to be *opaque*.

Noël has stated that what prostitutes want is to "demystify" their body. "Mystery" is a concept that has a straightforward affinity with race, displacement, ghettoization, and exclusion. Fanta submits parallel definitions of subjectivity and placement that challenges marginalization. "Place" for her, is a meaningless concept. After spending some years of her life in the US and France, Noël ended up living in her birthland, Port-au-Prince; the jealousy of the land made her return. She considers the whole world as her home and describes her alter-ego unpretentiously:

> A woman living somewhere in the world. She is a kind of courtesan, prostitute, but not a normal prostitute. She can analyze. She can talk about herself […] She can talk about what is her phantasma. [The interviewer asks why a prostitute?] Because a lot of people are afraid of that […] I think those women are very brave. The body is the only thing they possess, like a dancer.[44]

Since bravery attracts her, she dares to generously exhibit her body and give the audience as much as expected. Her desire for eccentricity meets her infatuation with bravery, but the point is that she rejects the established perception of her body; movements and costumes are *her* decisions, and the audience is permitted to look at her body based on *her* guidelines, which means that she refuses to welcome the forced gaze of the audience and the default position of her body as the object of the gaze. By mentioning that Fanta Kaba "can analyze," Noël claims a space, agency, subjectivity for the character. She – indirectly – requires a new position for her body in the society/space and re-formularizes the phallic and monochromatic history of representation. Being a volunteer to act in a position that, by default, is studied as maladaptive,

can reverse the gaze from an object to an active subject. Moreover, the statement that "a woman living somewhere in the world" respects the fluid location of the subject.

If proximity was the solution for Okpokwasili, Noël prefers distance. However, this does not alleviate the "troublemaking"[45] weight of her approach. By reenacting a bitter experience, Okpokwasili requires the audience to take the responsibility of dealing with the issue of racism, to identify with the Black girl. However, Noël does not traffic in compromise. She, in a dominant manner, by reversing the subject-object position, eradicates the normative understandings of the Black female body, and the audience is obliged to accept this new definition. Fanta, in this choreo-performance piece, mirrors the role of Zabou in *Timbuktu*. In the movie, Timbuktu is a city that is under the pressure of harsh Islamic groups; jihadists banned music, singing, and force women to wear hijab. Zabou lives alone in a corner of the city and refuses to follow the restrictions. As it seems in her words, this woman lives in the confusion of time and space in diaspora, baffled in different time zones and places: "Time doesn't matter. The earthquake is my body, the cracks, it's me! […] I am cracked. Sweetpea, you and I are alike. We are both cracked. Cracked everywhere."[46] The fragility of the situation of the displaced subject and their attachment to their homeland reveal themselves in Noël's sentences.

Fanta – Kettly or Zabou – does what Ahmed calls killing joy "simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising […] she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness."[47] She cries out about her prostitution in a bullhorn microphone. The bravery of the character, accompanied by a sense of pleasure, leads to a compressive impact that can be read unapologetically and intrusively for the viewer. Fanta Kaba stubbornly insists that being a prostitute is her choice; it is synonymous with freedom for her: "I wanna orgasm when I want." Her visible body does not act as a silent fetish for the dominant viewer, but the

degree of excessiveness and her audacity to act freely as Fleetwood believes "signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility."[48] Being aware that the history of art is saturated with the image of the Black female body as object, Noël poses a question on the very issue of hypervisibility of Black women imagery in visual culture. The Black female body has been framed as an object of the gaze, but Noël offers a new mode of the embodiment according to which the Black female body is the agent of action and an active participant in the process of representation. She fights against her corporeal fate and comments on the forced position of her body in space.

Coda

Okwui Okpokwasili and Kettly Noël, through their practice, indicate the expressive potentials of their body to exhibit the perplexity of displacement. Their work counters the stereotypes revolving around racialized and displaced bodies and seeks a new image that reflects their subjectivity as creative presence. While they acknowledge that the popular image of their bodies and their excessive presence in culture should be dismantled, they claim the very image of their bodies *strategically*.

The confrontational approaches that they have deployed and translated into movements are *proximity* and *exposure* – two strategies that are inherently condemned to failure because they are followed by violence and damage. Butler believes that "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."[49] However, as risky as these approaches seem, if applied aptly, they can provide the artists with a confident and powerful aesthetic language to confront the bankrupted image of a racialized body, since they are

the only ones who possess the body, and, accordingly, the only ones who can define the place for it.

In a choreo-performance, the one who judges and takes the responsibility for the actions is the audience. A choreo-performer just reenacts a scene based on real life and the audience is a part of this story. Because of its correspondence to movement and narrative, choreo-performance is a productive medium to represent the experience of displacement. The responsiveness of the medium to the space and the interaction it makes with the audience are the medium's advantages over other media. Traditional media, usually, keep their distance from reality; however, choreo-performance can be considered a fragment of reality or a duplicated version of it. Reality and performativity fade into each other in a choreo-performance piece. Embracing the reality makes this medium a suitable one for any type of expression; it is a lively and dynamic medium that includes various kinds of being, humans, identities.

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[10] Christina Sharpe describes a similar experience in “The Wake,” in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 1-24, 4
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